

James Potter

AND THE HALL
OF ELDERS' CROSSING



G. NORMAN LIPPERT

Based upon the characters and worlds of J.K. Rowling

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AFTERWORD

*Then I have an ivory chair high to sit upon,
Almost like my father's chair, which is an ivory throne;
There I sit uplift and upright, there I sit alone.*

- Christina Rossetti

PROLOGUE

Mr. Grey peeked around the corner and surveyed the corridor. It stretched off into dim infinity, dotted with floating globes of silvery light. Mr. Grey had been told that the globes were swampfire, encased in a timeloop charm so they were inextinguishable. He'd never even heard of swampfire, much less a timeloop charm, but then again, Mr. Grey had never been in a place quite like the Hall of Mysteries. He shuddered.

"I don't see anybody," he whispered to the two figures behind him. "No gates or locks, neither. Do you think maybe they're using invisible barriers or something?"

"Nar," a gravely voice answered. "We was told exactly where the beacons were placed, wasn't we? This section's clean. Sentry's all we have to worry about. If you don' see him, then move in."

Mr. Grey shuffled his feet. "I know what we was told, but it don't feel right, Bistle. I has a sense about these things. Me mam always said so."

"Don't call me Bistle, yeh sodding half-wit," said the gravely voice, which belonged to a particularly grizzly goblin in black shirt and trousers. "I'm Mr. Saffron when we're on the job. And blast yehr sixth sense. Yeh're just a great coward whenever yeh get in an unfamiliar place. The sooner we get on, the sooner it'll be over and we'll be back to the shack to celebrate."

The third figure, a tall, old man with a pointed, white goatee, stepped past Mr. Saffron and walked casually down the corridor, scanning the doors.

“See how Mr. Pink does it?” Mr. Saffron said, following closely and glancing around. “Knows to trust his information, he does. No sentry, no problems. Right, Mr. Pink?”

Mr. Grey trailed behind Mr. Saffron, frowning massively and watching the mysterious doors. There were hundreds--maybe thousands--of them along the endless corridor. None had names or markings of any kind. In the lead, Mr. Pink could be heard counting softly under his breath.

“Why do I have to be Mr. Grey?” Mr. Grey said petulantly. “Nobody likes grey. It’s hardly even a color at all.”

The goblin ignored him. After several minutes, Mr. Pink stopped walking. Mr. Saffron and Mr. Grey halted behind him, looking around the corridor with furrowed brows.

“Can’t be the place, Mr. Pink,” the goblin said. “There’s no doors in this section at all. Are yeh sure yeh counted aright?”

“I counted right,” Mr. Pink said. He glanced down at the floor, and then scuffed at a section of the marble tile with his toe. There was a chip in the corner of one of the tiles. Mr. Pink grunted and knelt down. He probed the broken corner with a finger. He nodded to himself, then hooked his finger into the hole and gave a tug. A rectangular section of the tile floor popped upwards, pulled open by Mr. Pink’s tugging finger. He heaved and the rectangular chunk of floor slid upwards like a long, vertical drawer, rising with a grating rumble until it touched the ceiling. It shuddered into place. It was as wide and tall as a door, but only a few inches thick. Mr. Grey peered around it and could see the endless corridor of the Hall of Mysteries stretching away behind it.

“How’d yeh know that was there?” Mr. Saffron demanded, slitting his eye up at Mr. Pink.

“She told me,” Mr. Pink responded, shrugging.

“She did, did she? Anything else you might know that you hain’t told us about, yet?”

“Just enough to get us there,” Mr. Pink replied. “You’re the lock breaker, Mr. Grey is the heavy hand, and I’m the mapper. We all know what we need to know, and nothing else.”

“Yar, yar, I remember,” the goblin grumbled. “Let me get on with it, then, won’t yeh?”

Mr. Pink stood aside as Mr. Saffron moved closer to the slab of mysterious stone. He studied it carefully, squinting and muttering. He laid one of his huge ears against it and tapped here and there. Finally, he reached into a pocket of his black shirt and produced a complicated device made of dozens of brass loops. He unfolded one and peered through it at the stone slab.

“Hardly worth the effort, really,” he muttered. “It’s a homunculus lock. Only opens when a predefined set of factors is present. Could be it only opens when a redheaded lass sings the national anthem of Atlantis at three o’clock on a Thursday. Or when the light of the setting sun is reflected from a cracked mirror onto a goat’s eye. Or when Mr. Grey hawks a bogey onto a purple newt. I’ve seen some good homunculus factors in my time, yar.”

“Is this a good one, then?” Mr. Grey asked rather hopefully.

The goblin grinned, showing lots of tiny, pointed teeth. “S’like Mr. Pink says, isn’t it? We all knows what we need to get the job done.” He reached into another pocket and produced a tiny glass vial filled with red powder. Carefully, the goblin uncorked the vial and upended the contents onto the floor before the stone slab. The powder swirled and eddied as it fell, so that as it hit the ground, it formed an unnaturally regular pattern. Mr. Grey peered down and saw that it had formed the shape of a skeletal hand with one finger pointing toward the slab.

Mr. Saffron produced a tiny brass tool and muttered, “*Acculumos.*” A narrow beam of greenish light glowed from the end of the tool. The goblin squatted and carefully laid the tool across the bony hand so that the light pointed at the exact angle of the pointing, skeletal finger.

Mr. Grey gasped and took a step backwards. Seen in the carefully arranged light of Mr. Saffron’s tool, the rough stone surface of the slab was no longer random. The play of light and shadow revealed an ornate engraving of a grinning skeleton surrounded by dancing, impish shapes. The skeleton’s right hand was outstretched, forming something like a door handle. The left hand was missing, and Mr. Pink shuddered again, realizing it was the shape formed in red powder on the floor.

“It’s a danse macabre,” Mr. Saffron said, studying the engraving. “A dance of death. Revealed with powdered dragon’s blood and cavernlight. Yar, it’s a good one, Grey.”

“Is it unlocked, then?” Mr. Pink asked briskly.

“Never was locked,” the goblin replied. “We just had to know where to grasp. Feel free to do the honors, Mr. Pink.”

The tall, bearded man approached the slab, careful not to block the greenish light. He reached forward and wrapped his hand around the outstretched fist of the skeletal engraving. He turned it, producing a low, grinding click. The engraved shape of the door swung inwards, revealing a large, dark space and a sound of distant, dripping water. Cold air pushed out of the opening, filling the corridor and ruffling Mr. Saffron’s black shirt. Mr. Grey shivered as the sweat on his forehead went cold.

“Where’s that go to? That space isn’t even here, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course it isn’t,” Mr. Saffron replied tersely, but he was clearly shaken as well. “It’s the hidden depository. We was told about it, just like everything else. That’s where the chest is. Come now, we haven’t much time.”

Mr. Pink led them through the doorway, ducking to fit through. It became apparent by the smell and the echo of their footsteps that they were in a deep cavern. Mr. Pink produced his wand and illuminated it, but it revealed little more than the shiny, wet rock beneath their feet. The blackness sucked at the light, and Mr. Grey had the sense that they were in a place so deep that it had never known sunlight. Raw, musty cold pressed onto their skin, chilling them after the warmth of the corridor. Mr. Grey glanced back once and could just see the shape of the door leading back. It glowed like a pillar of silvery light, almost as if it were a mirage.

“Wh-where do you think we are?” he asked.

“Air pocket in a cavern under the Atlantic ocean,” Mr. Pink replied, still walking.

“Under...” Mr. Grey said faintly, then swallowed. “I got a bad sense about this. Really bad. I want to go back, Bistle.”

“Don’t call me Bistle,” the goblin said automatically.

“What’s in this chest, anyway?” Mr. Grey moaned. “It better be worth a lot. I can’t think of anything worth coming to a place like this.”

“Never yeh mind that,” Mr. Saffron said gruffly. “It’s more than yeh’ve ever dreamed of. We’ll never have to work like this again. No more petty cons and midnight holdups for us. Once we get the chest, we’ll be set for good.”

“But what is it?” Mr. Grey insisted. “What’s in the chest?”

“Well, yeh’ll just wait and see, won’t yeh?”

Mr. Grey stopped walking. “You don’t know, do you?”

Mr. Saffron sputtered. “It doesn’t matter what it is, yeh great dummy. We was told it was more than we could ever dream of, wasn’t we? Alls we have to do is nick the box and gives a twenty percent share to our inside informer. They’d hardly help us break into the Ministry of Magic if they didn’t have a prize bit of swag in mind, would they? Mr. Pink knows what it is, anyway. Why don’t yeh arsk him?”

“I don’t know either,” Mr. Pink said thoughtfully.

There was a long moment of silence. Mr. Grey heard the steady drip of water echoing out of the darkness.

Finally Mr. Saffron said, “Yeh don’t know neither?”

Mr. Pink shook his head slowly, barely visible in his own wand light.

The goblin frowned. “Each of us only knows what we needs to know, aye?”

“All we need to know is where to go,” Mr. Pink said. “Once we get there, we’ll know what to do.”

The goblin nodded, remembering. “All right, then. Let’s go, Mr. Pink. You’re the mapper.”

“We’re there,” Mr. Pink replied. “It’s Grey’s job from here.” He turned and shone his wand ahead of them. A horrible, monstrous face loomed out of the blackness, lit in the feeble silvery light. Mr. Grey’s knees went watery.

“It’s jest a statue, yeh ninny,” Mr. Saffron growled. “It’s the dragon’s head we were tol’ about. Go on and open it. Earn your share, Mr. Grey.”

“I hate that name,” Mr. Grey said, walking toward the dragon’s head statue. It was taller than he was, formed eerily from the stalactites and stalagmites of the cavern wall. “I wanted to be Mr. Purple. I like purple.”

He crouched and slipped his hands between the snaggle teeth of the dragon’s upper jaw. Mr. Grey was unusually strong, but lifting the dragon’s jaw required every ounce of his formidable power. Sweat streamed down his face and neck as he strained, but the statue wouldn’t budge. Finally, just as Mr. Grey was certain he would tear his muscles loose from his bones, there was a glassy shattering sound and the jaw jarred loose. The stalactites that formed the hinge of the jaw had broken. Mr. Grey heaved the jaw upwards until it was high enough for the others to scramble through.

“Hurry!” he ordered through gritted teeth.

“Just don’t drop the blasted thing on us,” Mr. Saffron whined as he and Mr. Pink ducked into the gaping dragon’s jaw.

The opening behind the dragon’s head was low and almost perfectly round. Stalactites and stalagmites surrounded the space like pillars supporting a smooth, domed ceiling. The stone floor was terraced, leading down to the center where a strange shape sat in the darkness.

“It’s not a chest,” Mr. Pink stated flatly.

“Nar,” Mr. Saffron agreed. “But it’s the only thing here, isn’t it? Think we can lug it between us?”

Mr. Pink descended the terraces, leaving the goblin to scramble after him. They studied the object for a moment, and then Mr. Pink placed his wand between his teeth. He bent down, grasping the object, and nodded for the goblin to grasp the other side. It was surprisingly light, though crusted with calcium and mineral. Clumsily, they carried the object between them, hefting it up the terraces. Mr. Pink’s wand light bobbed and jerked, making their shadows leap wildly on the pillared walls.

Finally, they heaved the object through the open jaw of the dragon’s head statue. Mr. Grey was sweating profusely, his knees trembling. When he saw that his companions were out of the way, he released

the upper jaw. It slammed down and shattered, producing a cloud of gritty dust and a deafening crash. Mr. Grey collapsed backward onto the stony floor of the cavern, faint with exertion.

“So what is it?” Mr. Saffron asked, ignoring Mr. Grey’s heaving breaths. “It doesn’t look like it’s worth a fortune.”

“I never said it was worth a fortune,” a voice said from the blackness behind them. “I merely said it was enough to take care of you for life. Funny how many meanings a phrase like that can have, isn’t it?”

Mr. Saffron wheeled around, seeking the source of the voice, but Mr. Pink turned slowly, almost as if he’d expected it. A shape formed out of the darkness. It was draped in black robes. The face was obscured behind a horrible glinting mask. Two more similarly dressed figures emerged from the darkness.

“I recognize your voice,” Mr. Pink said. “I should’ve known.”

“Yes,” the voice agreed. “You should’ve, Mr. Fletcher, but you didn’t. Your years of experience are no match for your innate greed. And now it is too late.”

“Wait now,” Mr. Saffron cried, throwing up his hands. “We had us a bargain. Yeh can’t do this! We had a deal!”

“Yes we did, my goblin friend. Thank you very much for your services. Here is your cut.”

A flash of orange light leapt from one of the masked figures, striking Mr. Saffron in the face. He stumbled and clutched at his throat, making thick choking sounds. He collapsed backwards, still writhing.

Mr. Grey stood shakily to his feet. “That’s not right. You shouldn’t have done that to Bistle. He only did what you asked.”

“And we are only doing what we promised,” the voice behind the mask said pleasantly. There was another jet of orange light and Mr. Grey collapsed heavily.

The three masked figures drifted closer, surrounding Mr. Pink. He looked around at them hopelessly. “At least tell me what it is,” he said. “Tell me what this thing is that you made us get for you, and why you made us do it instead of doing it yourselves.”

“Your last question, I am afraid, is none of your business, Mr. Fletcher,” the voice said, circling him. “As they say: if we told you, we’d have to kill you. That would not be living up to our end of the bargain. We promised to take care of you for life, and we intend to fulfill that promise. It may not be much of a life, granted, but beggars cannot be choosers.”

A wand appeared, pointing at Mr. Pink’s face. He hadn’t used the name Fletcher for years. He’d given it up when he’d given up being a crook. He’d tried so hard to be good and honest. But then he’d been approached about this job: an inside job at the Ministry of Magic, a job so perfect, with a payoff so grand, that he simply couldn’t turn it down. Sure, all his old friends in the Order would be disappointed in him,

but most of them were dead now, anyway. Nobody even knew his real name anymore. Or so he thought. Apparently these people had known who he really was all along. They'd used him, and now he was going to be disposed of. It was fitting, in a way. He sighed.

The voice went on. "As for your first question, however, I expect we can answer that. It seems only fair. And after today, who could you possibly tell? You came looking for a chest of riches because you are a small man with small aims. We are not small, Mr. Fletcher. Our aims are grand. And thanks to you and your cohorts, we now have everything we need to accomplish those aims. Our goal is power, and what you see here is the means to that power. What you see here, Mr. Fletcher... is simply the end of your world."

Hopelessness filled Mundungus Fletcher and he fell to his knees. When the jet of orange light struck him, choking him, covering him with darkness, he welcomed it. He embraced it.



I. SHADOW OF LEGENDS

James Potter moved slowly along the narrow aisles of the train, peering as nonchalantly as he could into each compartment. To those inside, he probably looked as if he was searching for someone, some friend or group of confidantes with whom to pass the time during the trip, and this was intentional. The last thing that James wanted anyone to notice was that, despite the bravado he had so recently displayed with his younger brother Albus on the platform, he was nervous. His stomach knotted and churned as if he'd had half a bite of one of Uncles Ron and George's Puking Pastilles. He opened the folding door at the end of the passenger car and stepped carefully through the passage into the next one. The first compartment was full of girls. They were talking animatedly to one another, already apparently the best of friends despite the fact that, most likely, they had only just met. One of them glanced up and saw him staring. He quickly looked away, pretending to peer out the window behind them, toward the station which still sat bustling with activity. Feeling his cheeks go a little red, he continued down the corridor. If only Rose was a year older she'd be here with him. She was a girl, but she was his cousin and they'd grown up together. It would've been nice to have at least one familiar face along with him.

Of course, Ted and Victoire were also on the train. Ted, a seventh year, had been so quickly absorbed into a noisy throng of returning friends and classmates that he'd barely had time to wave and wink at James before disappearing into a crammed compartment from which emanated the thump of music on a sleek new wireless. Victoire, five years older than he, had invited him to sit with her during the trip, but James wasn't as comfortable with her as he was with Rose, and didn't relish the idea of listening to her prattle on with the four other girls in her compartment about pixie powder blushes and hair care charms. Being part Veela, Victoire had never had any problem making friends of either gender, quickly and effortlessly. Besides, something in James felt that he needed to assert himself as an individual straight off, even if the thought left him feeling nervous and lonely.

It wasn't that he was worried about going to Hogwarts exactly. He'd been looking forward to this day for most of his life, ever since he was old enough to understand what it meant to be a wizard, ever since his mum had told him of the school he'd one day attend, the secret school that witches and wizards attended to learn magic. He was positively itching with anticipation of his first classes, of learning to use the brand new wand that he carried proudly in his backpack. More than anything, he was looking forward to Quidditch on the Hogwarts pitch, getting on his first real broom, trying out for the team, maybe, just maybe...

But that was where his excitement began to melt into cold anxiety. His dad had been the Gryffindor Seeker, the youngest one in Hogwarts history. The best he, James, could hope for was to match that record. That's what everyone would expect of him, the first-born son of the famous hero. He remembered the story, told to him dozens of times (although never by his own dad) of how the young Harry Potter had won his first Golden Snitch by virtually jumping off his broom, catching the golden ball in his mouth and nearly swallowing it. The tellers of the tale would always laugh uproariously, delightedly, and if Dad was there, he'd smile sheepishly as they clapped him on the back. When James was four, he found that famed Snitch in a shoe box in the bottom of the dining room hutch. His mum told him it'd been a gift to Dad from the old school headmaster. The tiny wings no longer worked, and the golden ball had a thin coat of dust and tarnish on it, but James was mesmerized by it. It was the first Snitch he had ever seen close up. It seemed both smaller and larger than he'd imagined, and the weight of it in his small hand was surprising. *This is the famous Snitch*, James thought reverently, *the one from the story, the one caught by my dad*. He asked his dad if he could keep it, stored in the shoebox when he wasn't playing with it, in his room. His dad agreed easily, happily, and James moved the shoebox from the bottom of the hutch to a spot under the head of his bed, next to his toy broom. He pretended the dark corner under his headboard was his Quidditch locker. He spent many an hour pretending to zoom and bank over the Quidditch green, chasing the fabled Snitch, in the end, always catching it in a fantastic diving crash, jumping up, producing his dad's tarnished Snitch for the approval of roaring imaginary crowds.

But what if James couldn't catch the Snitch, as his father had done? What if he wasn't as good on the broom? Uncle Ron had said that riding a broom was in the Potter blood as sure as dragons breathed fire, but what if James proved him wrong? What if he was slow, or clumsy, or fell off? What if he didn't even make the team? For the rest of the first years, that would only be a mild disappointment. Even though the

rules had been changed to admit them, very few first years ever made the House teams. For James, however, that would mean he already hadn't measured up to expectations. He would already have failed to be as great as the great Harry Potter. And if he couldn't even measure up to his dad in terms of something as elemental as Quidditch, how could he ever hope to live up to the legend of the boy who defeated the Basilisk, won the Triwizard Cup, united the Deathly Hallows and, oh yeah, put old Moldy Voldy, the darkest and most dangerous wizard who ever lived, in the ground for good?

The train gave a protracted, noisy lurch. Outside, the conductor's voice called for the doors to be shut. James stopped in the corridor, suddenly overcome by a cold certainty that the worst had already happened, he had already failed miserably even before he'd begun to try. He felt a deep, sudden stab of homesickness and blinked back tears, looking quickly into the next compartment. There were two boys inside, neither talking, both looking out the window as Platform Nine and Three Quarters began to slip slowly past. James opened the door and blundered in quickly, hoping to see his family outside the window, feeling an enormous need to make eye contact with them one last time before it was too late. His own reflection in the glass, lit by the hard morning sun, blotted the view of the crowd outside. There were so many people; he would never find them in that throng. He scanned the crowd desperately anyway. And then there they were. They were just where he'd left them, a tiny knot of people standing still in the milling faces, like rocks in a stream. They didn't see him, didn't know where he was in the train. Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur were waving to a point further back on the train, apparently mouthing goodbyes to Victoire. Dad and Mum stood smiling somewhat wistfully at the train, scanning the windows. Albus stood next to Dad, and Lily held Mum's hand, transfixed by the gigantic crimson engine as it chuffed great bursts of steam and hissed and rang, picking up speed. And then Mum's eye caught James and her face lit up. She said something and Dad turned, looked, and found him. They both waved, smiling proudly. Mum wiped her eye with one hand, held up Lily's hand with the other, waving it to James. James didn't smile back, but watched them and felt a bit better anyway. They receded backward as if they were on a conveyor belt, more faces, more waving hands and milling bodies coming between them. James watched until they all vanished behind a wall at the end of the platform, then he sighed, dropped his backpack onto the floor, and plopped into a seat.

Several minutes of silence went by as James watched London scroll past the windows. The city thinned into crowded suburbs and industrial areas, all looking busy and purposeful in the bright morning sunlight. He wondered, as he sometimes did, what life was like as a non-magical person, and for once he envied them, going to their non-magical, less intimidating (or so he thought) schools and jobs. Finally he turned his attention to the two other boys sharing his compartment. One was seated on the same side as him, closer to the door. He was big, with a squarish head and short dark hair. He was flipping avidly through an illustrated booklet called *Elemental Magic: What to Know for the New Witch and Wizard*. James had seen copies of these being sold from a small stall on the platform. On the cover, a good-looking teenaged wizard in school robes was winking as he conjured a series of objects from a trunk. He had just produced a full-sized tree with cheeseburgers for fruit when the boy flipped the cover backwards and settled in to read one of the articles. James turned his attention to the boy across from him, who was looking at him openly, smiling.

“I’ve got a cat,” said the boy, unexpectedly. James blinked at him, and then noticed the box sitting on the seat next to the boy. It had a hinged grate for a door and a small black and white cat could be seen inside, lounging and licking its forepaw. “You aren’t allergic to cats, are you?” the boy asked James earnestly.

“Oh. No,” James replied, “I don’t think so. My family has a dog, but my Aunt Hermione has a big old carpet of a cat. I’ve never had a problem with it.”

“That’s good,” the boy answered matter-of-factly. He had an American accent that James found a little amusing. “My mom and dad are both allergic to cats so we could never have one, but I like them. When I saw that I could bring a cat, I knew that was what I wanted. This is Thumbs. He has extra toes, see? One on each paw. It’s not particularly magical, I suppose, but it makes him interesting. What’d you bring?”

“I’ve got an owl. He’s been in the family for a few years. A big, old barn owl with plenty of miles on him. I wanted a frog, but my dad says a boy should start school with an owl. He says there’s no more useful animal for a first year, but I think he just wanted me to have one because he had one.”

The boy grinned happily. “So your dad is a wizard, too? Mine isn’t. Neither is my mom. I’m the first in my family. We just found out about the magical world last year. I could hardly believe it! I always thought magic was the sort of thing that happened at little kids’ birthday parties. Guys in tall black hats pulling silver dollars out of your ear. Stuff like that. Wow! Have you known you were a wizard all your life?”

“Pretty much. It’s hard to miss when your first memories are of your grandparents arriving for Christmas morning via the fireplace,” James answered, watching the boy’s eyes widen. “Of course, it never seemed strange to me at all, you know. It was just life.”

The boy whistled appreciatively. “That’s wild and crazy! Lucky you! Anyway, my name’s Zane Walker. I’m from the States, if you haven’t guessed. My dad is working in England for the year, though. He works on movies, which isn’t as exciting as it sounds. I’ll probably be going to the wizarding school in America next year, but it looks like it’s Hogwarts for me this year, which is fine by me, although if they try to give me any more kidneys or fish for breakfast, I think I’ll blow a gasket. Good to meet you.” He finished in a rush, and reached across the compartment to shake James’ hand in a gesture that was so guileless and automatic that James almost laughed. He shook Zane’s hand happily, relieved to have so quickly made an acquaintance. “I’m happy to meet you, too, Zane. My name’s Potter. James Potter.”

Zane sat back and looked at James, tilting his head curiously. “Potter. James Potter?” he repeated. James felt a small, familiar surge of pride and satisfaction. He was used to being recognized, even if he pretended to not always like it. Zane made a sort of quizzical half-frown, half-grin. “Where’s Q, double-oh-seven?”

James faltered. “Excuse me?”

“What? Oh, sorry,” Zane said, his expression changing to one of bemusement. “Thought you were making a James Bond joke. Hard to tell with that accent.”

“James who?” James said, feeling that the conversation was slipping away from him. “And what accent? *You’re* the one with the accent!”

“Your last name’s Potter?” This came from the third boy in the compartment. He’d lowered his booklet a little.

“Yes. James Potter.”

“Potter!” Zane said in a fairly ridiculous attempt at an English accent. “James Potter!” He raised his fist next to his face, index finger pointed toward the ceiling like a pistol.

“Are you related to this Harry Potter kid?” said the bigger boy, ignoring Zane. “Only I’m reading about him right here in this ‘Brief History of the Magical World’ article. Seems like he was a pretty big deal.”

“He’s not a kid anymore,” James laughed. “He’s my dad. He’s less of a big deal when you see him eating Wheatabix in his boxers each morning.” This wasn’t technically true, but it always put people at ease to think they’d gotten a mental glimpse of the great Harry Potter in a candid moment. The large boy raised his eyebrows, frowning slightly. “Wow! Cool. Says here he defeated the most dangerous evil wizard ever. Some guy named, umm...” He glanced down at the booklet, scanning it. “It’s right here somewhere. Volda-whatsit or something.”

“Yeah, it’s true,” James said. “But really, now he’s just my dad. That was a long time ago.” But the other boy had turned his attention to Zane.

“You’re Muggle-born, too?” he asked. Zane looked baffled for a moment. “What? I’m what-born?”

“Non-magical parents. Like me,” said the bigger boy seriously. “I’m trying to learn the language. My dad says it’s important to get a handle on the basics straight off. He’s a Muggle, but he’s already read *Hogwarts: A History* cover to cover. He quizzed me on it the whole ride in. Ask me a question. Anything.” He glanced back and forth between Zane and James.

James raised his eyebrows at Zane, who frowned and shook his head. “Um. What’s seven times forty-three?”

The bigger boy rolled his eyes and slumped in his seat. “I *meant* about Hogwarts and the wizarding world.”

“I’ve got a new wand,” Zane said, abandoning the bigger boy and turning to dig in his pack. “It’s made of birch, with a unicorn tail in it or something. Can’t get it to do squat, yet. Not for lack of effort, though, I’ll tell you that.” He turned, flourishing the wand, which was wrapped in yellow cloth.

“I’m Ralph, by the way,” said the bigger boy, putting aside his booklet. “Ralph Deedle. I just got my wand yesterday. It’s made of willow, with a Himalayan yeti whisker core.”

James glanced at him. “A what?”

“A Himalayan yeti whisker. Very rare, according to the man we bought it from. Cost my dad twenty Galleons. Which translates to a good bit, I think.” He studied Zane’s and James’ faces in turn. “Er, why?”

James raised his eyebrows. “It’s just that I’ve never heard of a Himalayan yeti.”

Ralph sat up and leaned forward earnestly. “Sure! You know what those are. Some people call them abominable snowmen. I always thought they were imaginary, you know. But then on my birthday, my dad and me found out I was a wizard, and I’d always thought wizards were imaginary, too! Well, now I’m learning about all kinds of crazy things that I thought were imaginary that are turning out to be true.” He picked up his booklet again and fanned the pages with one hand, gesturing vaguely with the other.

“Just out of curiosity,” James said carefully, “where did you buy your wand?”

Ralph grinned. “Oh, well we thought that was going to be the hard part, didn’t we? I mean, there don’t seem to be wand merchants on every corner where we come from, which is Surrey. So we got down here to the city early and followed the directions to that Diagon Alley place. No problem! There was a man right there on the street corner with a little booth.”

Zane was watching Ralph with interest.

“A little booth,” James prodded.

“Yeah! Of course, he didn’t have the wands right there in the open. He was selling maps. Dad bought one and asked directions to the best wandmaker in town. My dad develops security software. For computers. Did I mention that? Anyway, he asked for the best, most state of the art wandmaker. Turned out the man was an expert wandmaker himself. Only makes a few a year, but keeps them special for people who really know what they are looking for. So Dad bought the best one he had.”

James was trying to keep his face straight. “The best one he had,” he repeated.

“Yeah,” Ralph confirmed. He dug in his own backpack and pulled out something about the size of a rolling pin, wrapped in brown paper.

“The one with the yeti core,” James confirmed.

Ralph suddenly glanced at him, halfway through unwrapping the package he’d removed from his backpack. “You know, it starts sounding a little silly when you say it, doesn’t it?” he asked a bit morosely. “Ah, bugger.”

He pulled the brown paper off. It was about eighteen inches long and as thick as a broomstick. The end had been whittled to a dull point and painted lime green. They all stared at it. After a moment, Ralph looked a bit desperately at James. “It’s not really good for anything magical, is it?”

James tilted his head. “Well, it’d be a treat for killing vampires with, I’d think.”

“Yeah?” Ralph brightened.

Zane straightened and pointed to the door of the compartment. “Woo! Food! Hey, James, you got any of that wacky wizard money? I’m starved.”

The old witch that operated the food cart peered into the open door of their compartment. “Anything you’d fancy, dears?”

Zane had jumped up and was looking eagerly over her wares, examining them with a serious, critical eye. He glanced back at James expectantly. “Come on, Potter, now’s your chance to welcome us Muggle-borns to the table with a little wizard generosity. All I have is an American ten dollar bill.” He turned back to the witch. “You don’t take American greenbacks, do you?”

She blinked and looked slightly aghast. “American green... excuse me?”

“Drat. I thought not,” Zane said, wiggling his upturned palm towards James.

James dug in the pocket of his jeans, bemused and amazed at the boy’s temerity. “Wizard money isn’t like play money, you know,” he said reproachfully, but there was a smile in his voice.

Ralph looked up from his booklet again, blinking. “Did he just say ‘drat’?”

“Oooh! Look at this!” Zane cried happily. “Cauldron Cakes! And Licorice Wands! You wizards really know how to carry a metaphor. *Us* wizards, I mean. Heh!”

James paid the witch and Zane flopped back into his seat, opening a box of Licorice Wands. Assorted colors of wands were laid out in neat compartments. Zane produced a red one, brandished it, and then flicked it toward Ralph. There was a pop and a shower of tiny, purple flowers peppered the front of Ralph’s tee shirt. Ralph glanced down at them.

“Better than I’ve gotten out of my own wand, yet,” Zane said, biting off the end of the wand with gusto.

James was surprised and pleased to find that he wasn’t nervous anymore, or at least not much. He opened the box containing his own Chocolate Frog, caught the frog in the air as it leaped out, and bit its head off. He looked down into the bottom of the box and saw the face of his dad peering up at him. ‘Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived’, ran the caption at the bottom of the card. He took the card out of the box and handed it to Ralph.

“Here. A little something for my new Muggle-born friend,” he said as Ralph took it. Ralph hardly noticed. He was chewing, holding up one of the tiny, purple flowers. “I don’t know for sure,” he said, looking at it, “but I think these are made out of meringue.”



After the initial rush of excitement and worry, then the whirlwind of making new acquaintances, the rest of the train ride seemed remarkably mundane. James found himself in turns either acting as a tour guide for his two new friends or having their conversation explained to him wherever they centered on Muggle life and concepts. He found it incredible that they had apparently spent a great chunk of their lives watching television. Whenever they weren't watching it, it seemed that they and their friends were playing games on it, pretending to drive racing cars or go on adventures or play sports. James had, of course, heard of television and video games, but having had mostly wizard friends, he'd assumed Muggle children only engaged in those activities when there was absolutely nothing better to do. When he asked Ralph why he'd spent so much time playing sports on the television instead of playing them in real life, Ralph merely rolled his eyes, made an exasperated noise, and then looked helplessly at Zane. Zane had clapped James on the back and said, "James, buddy, it's a Muggle thing. You wouldn't understand."

James, in turn, had explained as best he could about Hogwarts and the magical world. He told them about the unplotable nature of the castle, which meant it couldn't be found on any map by anyone who didn't already know its location. He described the school houses and explained the House points system Dad and Mum had told him about. He tried, as best he could, to explain Quidditch, which seemed to leave both of them confused and frustratingly unenthusiastic. Zane had had the ridiculous idea that only witches rode brooms, apparently based on a movie called *The Wizard of Oz*. James tried very patiently to explain that both wizards and witches rode brooms and that it wasn't at all 'a girly thing'. Zane, apparently sensing the consternation this was causing, went on to insist that all witches were supposed to have green skin and warts on their noses, and the conversation quickly deteriorated.

Just as evening was beginning to turn the sky a pale purple and silhouette the trees outside the train's windows, a tall, older boy with neatly cropped blonde hair knocked sharply on their compartment door. "Hogsmeade Station straight ahead," he said, leaning in with an air of brisk purpose. "You fellows will want to be getting your school robes on."

Zane frowned and raised his eyebrows at the boy. "We will, will we?" he asked. "It's almost seven o'clock. Are you *quite* sure?" He pronounced the word 'quite' with his ridiculous English accent. The older boy's brow darkened very slightly.

"My name is Steven Metzker. Fifth year. Prefect. And you are?"

Zane jumped up, offering the boy his hand in a parody of the gesture he'd shown James at the beginning of the trip. "Walker. Zane Walker. Happy to meet you Mr. Prefect."

Steven glanced down at the proffered hand, and then decided, with an apparently great effort, to go ahead and shake it. He spoke to the compartment at large as he did so. "There will be a dinner in the Great Hall promptly upon your arrival on the school grounds. School robes are required. I will assume by your accent, Mr. Walker," he said, retracting his hand and looking bracingly at Zane, "that dressing for dinner is a relatively new concept. No doubt you'll catch on fast." He caught James' eye, dropped a quick wink, and then disappeared down the corridor.

"No doubt I shall," Zane said cheerfully.

James helped Ralph and Zane make sense of their robes. Ralph had put his on backwards, making him look to James like the youngest cleric he'd ever seen. Zane, liking the look, had turned his around on purpose, proclaiming that if it wasn't the style yet, it soon would be. Only when James had insisted that it would be disrespectful to the school and teachers did Zane reluctantly agree to turn it back around.

James had been told repeatedly and in great detail what would happen when they arrived. He knew about Hogsmeade Station, had even been there a few times when he was very young, although he had no memories of it. He knew about the boats which would ferry them across the lake and had seen dozens of pictures of the castle. Still, he discovered that none of that had quite prepared him for the grandness and solemnity of it. As the tiny boats glided across the lake, drawing V-shaped wakes on the glassy water, James stared with a kind of wonder that was perhaps even greater than that felt by those with him who hadn't come believing they knew what to expect. The sheer bulk of the castle amazed him as it rambled and clumped on the great rocky hilltop. It soared upwards in turrets and ramparts, each structural detail lit on one side by the blue of the approaching night, on the other by the golden rose of the setting sun. A galaxy of windows dotted the castle, glowing a warm yellow on the shaded sides, glittering like sunfire on the lit. The massiveness and weight of the sight seemed to press down on James with a pleasant awe, going straight through him and down, down, into its own reflection deep in the mirror of the lake.

There was one detail he hadn't expected, however. Halfway across the lake, just as conversation had begun to spring up again among the new students and they began to hoot excitedly and call to each other across the water, James noticed another boat on the lake. Unlike the ones he and his fellow first years rode in, it wasn't lit by a lantern. Nor was it approaching the castle. It was pointed away from the lights of Hogwarts, a larger boat than his own, but still small enough to be nearly lost in the dim shadows at the edge of the lake. There was one person in it, lanky and thin, almost spiderlike. James thought it looked like a woman. Just as he was about to turn away and forget the decidedly unremarkable sight, the figure looked up at him suddenly, as if aware of his curiosity. In the darkening light, he was almost sure their eyes met, and a totally unexpected coldness came over him. It was indeed a woman. Her skin was dark, her face bony, hard, with high cheeks and a sharp chin. A scarf was tied down neatly over her head, hiding most of her hair. The look on her face as she watched him watch her wasn't frightened or angry. Her face didn't seem to have any expression at all, in fact. And then she vanished. James blinked in surprise, before realizing, a moment later, that she hadn't

actually vanished, she had simply been obscured behind a hedge of reeds and cattails as their boats grew further apart. He shook his head, smiled at himself for being a typically jumpy first year, and then returned his gaze to the journey ahead.

The gaggle of first years entered the courtyard with a chorus of appreciative chatter. James found himself straggling, threading almost unconsciously to the rear of the group as they climbed the steps into the brightly lit corridor. There was Mr. Filch, whom James recognized by his hair, scowl, and the cat, Mrs. Norris, which he held cradled in the crook of his arm. Here were the enchanted staircases, even now creaking and grinding into new positions to the mingled delight and trepidation of the new students. And here, finally, were the doors into the Great Hall, their panels gleaming mellowly in the light of the chandeliers. As the students congregated there, conversation faltered to silence. Zane, standing shoulder to shoulder with Ralph, who was nearly a head taller, turned and looked over his shoulder at James, waggling his eyebrows and grinning.

The doors creaked and swung inwards, light and sound pouring out through them as they revealed the Great Hall in all its splendor. The four long House tables were full of students, hundreds of faces grinning, laughing, chattering, and capering. James looked for Ted, but couldn't find him in the throng.

The tall, slightly gawky teacher who'd led them to the doors turned and faced them, smiling disarmingly. "Welcome to Hogwarts, first years!" he called over the noise of the Hall. "My name is Professor Longbottom. You'll be sorted into your houses straight off. Once that's done, you'll find your table and dinner will be served. Please follow me."

He turned with a flap of his robes and proceeded briskly down the center of the Great Hall. Nervously, the first years began to follow, first in a shuffle, then in a brisk trot, trying to keep up. James saw the heads of Ralph and Zane crane back, their chins pointing higher and higher. He'd almost forgotten about the enchanted ceiling. He looked up himself, but only a little, not wanting to look like he was *too* impressed. The higher he looked, the more the ceiling beams and alcoves retreated into transparency, revealing a stunning representation of the outside sky. Cold, brittle-looking stars glittered like silver dust on jeweler's velvet and off to the right, just over the Gryffindor table, the half-moon could be seen, its giant face looking both mad and jolly.

"Did he say his name was *Longbottom*?" Zane said to James out of the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah. Neville Longbottom."

"Wow," Zane breathed. "You Brits really have a thing to learn about subtlety. I don't even know where to start with a name like that." Ralph shushed him as the crowd began to quiet, noticing the first years lining up along the front of the hall.

James looked along the table on the dais, trying to pick out all the teachers he knew about. There was Professor Slughorn, looking just as fat and ridiculously baroque as his parents had described. Slughorn, James recalled, had come on as a temporary teacher during his parents' time, apparently reluctantly, and then

simply never left. Next to him was the ghostly Professor Binns, then Professor Trelawney, blinking owlishly behind her gigantic spectacles. Further down the table, recognizable by his size (James could see he sat on a stack of three enormous books) was Professor Flitwick. Several other faces James didn't recognize were scattered about: teachers who'd come since his parents' time and were therefore relatively unfamiliar. No sign of Hagrid, but James had learned that he was off among the giants again with Grawp, and wouldn't return until the following day. Finally, at the center of the table, just then standing and raising her arms, was Minerva McGonagall, the Headmistress.

"Welcome returning students, and welcome new students," she said in her piercing, rather tremulous voice, "to this first banquet of this new year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." A cheer of happy acknowledgement went up from the seated students behind James. He glanced back over his shoulder, scanning the crowd. He saw Ted seated, hooting through his cupped hands, surrounded by group of somehow impossibly handsome and beautiful older boys and girls at the Gryffindor table. James tried to smile at him, but Ted didn't notice.

As the cheers diminished, Professor McGonagall continued. "I'm glad to see you are all as excited to be here as are your teachers and school staff. Let us hope that this spirit of mutual understanding and unity of purpose accompanies us throughout the school year." She eyed the crowd, picking out certain individuals. James heard scattered scuffling and the marked silences of conspicuous guilty grins.

"And now," the Headmistress went on, turning to watch as a chair was carried onto the stage by two older students. James noticed that one of them was Steven Metzker, the prefect they'd encountered on the train. "As is our proud tradition on the occasion of our first gathering, let us witness the Sorting of our newest students into their respective houses. First years, will you please approach the platform? I will be calling your names individually. You will approach the platform and have a seat..."

James tuned out the rest. He knew this ceremony well, having quizzed his parents endlessly about it. He had been, in the previous days, more excited about the Sorting ceremony than he had been about anything else. In truth, he recognized now that his excitement had actually masked a numbing, terrible fear. The Sorting Hat was the first test he'd have to pass in order to prove he was the man his parents expected him to be, the man the wizarding world had already begun to assume he was. It hadn't quite hit him until he'd seen the article in the *Daily Prophet* several weeks earlier. It had been a fluffy, happy, little article of the 'whatever happened to so-and-so' variety, and yet it had filled James with a sort of cold, creeping dread. The article summarized the ongoing biography of Harry Potter, now married to his school sweetheart, Ginny Weasley, and announced that James, the first-born son of Harry and Ginny Potter, was to be attending his first year at Hogwarts. James had been particularly haunted by the line that ended the article. He could recall it word for word: *We at the Daily Prophet, along with the rest of the magical world, wish young Mr. Potter all the best as he moves on to fulfill, and perhaps even surpass, the expectations any of us could hope to have of the son of such a beloved and legendary figure.*

What would the *Daily Prophet*, or the rest of the wizarding world, think of the son of the beloved and legendary figure if he sat on that chair and the Sorting Hat proclaimed him something other than a Gryffindor? Back on Platform Nine and Three Quarters, James had confided this very fear to his dad.

“There isn’t any more magic in being a Gryffindor than there is in being a Hufflepuff or a Ravenclaw or a Slytherin, James,” Harry Potter had said, squatting down and putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder. James had pressed his lips together, knowing his dad would say something like that.

“Would that have comforted you back when you were getting ready to sit on the chair and put that hat on your head?” he’d asked in a low, serious voice.

His dad didn’t answer, only pressed his lips together, smiled ruefully and shook his head. “But I was a worried, superficial, little git back then, James, my boy. Try not to be like me in that regard, OK? We know great witches and wizards from all the houses. I’ll be proud and honored to have my son in any of them.”

James had nodded, but it hadn’t worked. He knew what his dad really wanted--and expected--despite the talk. James was to be a Gryffindor, just like Mum and Dad, just like his uncles and aunt, just like all the heroes and legends he’d been told about since he was a baby, all the way back to Godric Gryffindor himself, greatest of all the founders of Hogwarts.

And yet now, as he stood, watching the Sorting Hat being produced and held aloft by the skinny arms of Headmistress McGonagall, he found that all his fears and worries had somehow drained away. He’d had a sort of idea during the last few hours. Now it came fully to the front of his mind. He had assumed all along that he had no choice but to compete with his father and try to fill his enormous shoes. His subsequent terrible fear had been that he would be unequal to the task, that he would fail. But what if there was another option? What if he simply didn’t try?

James stared ahead, unseeing, as the first students were called to the chair, as the hat was lowered onto their heads, almost hiding their intensely curious, upturned eyes. He looked like a statue--a statue of a small boy with his father’s unruly black hair and his mother’s nose and expressive lips. What if he simply didn’t try to live up to the giant shadow cast by his dad? Not that he wouldn’t be great in his own way. It would just be a very different way. A decidedly, *intentionally* different way. And what if that started here? Right here, on the platform, on his first day, being proclaimed... well, something other than a Gryffindor. That would be all that mattered. Unless...

“James Potter,” the voice of the Headmistress rang out with her distinctive rolled ‘r’ on his last name. He startled, looking up at her as if he’d forgotten she was there. She looked a hundred feet tall standing there on the platform, her arm held out ramrod straight and holding the Sorting Hat over the chair, casting a triangular shadow onto it. He was about to move forward and climb the short flight of steps to the platform when a noise broke out behind him. It shocked and worried him for a moment. He was irrationally afraid that somehow his thoughts had gotten out and betrayed him, that it was the noise of the Gryffindor table standing, booing him. But it wasn’t the sound of booing. It was the sound of applause, polite and sustained,

in response to the calling of his name. James turned to the Gryffindor table, a smile of gratitude and happiness already lighting his face. But they weren't the ones applauding. They sat there rather blankly. Most of their heads were turned toward the source of the sound. James turned, following their eyes. It was the Slytherin table.

James felt rooted to the spot. The entire table was looking at him with pleasant smiles, every one open, happy, applauding. One of the students, a tall, very attractive girl with wavy black hair and large, sparkling eyes, was standing. She clapped lightly but confidently, smiling directly at James. Finally, the other tables began to join in, first in dribs and drabs, and then in a sustained, rather puzzled ovation.

"Yes. Yes, thank you," Headmistress McGonagall called over the applause. "That will be enough. We are all quite, er, happy that we have young Mr. Potter here with us this year. Now, if you'll please resume your seats..." James began his ascent of the dais while the applause died down. As he turned and sat down on the chair, he heard the Headmistress mutter, "So we can finish this and have dinner before the next equinox." James turned to look up at her, but saw only the dark maw of the Sorting Hat coming down on top of him. He closed his eyes tightly and felt the cool softness of the hat cover his head, slipping down over his brow.

Instantly, all other sound stopped. James was in the mind of the hat, or perhaps it was the other way around. It spoke, but not to him.

"Potter, James, yes, I've been expecting this one. The third Potter that's come under my brim. Always difficult, these..." it mused to itself, as if it enjoyed the challenge. "Courage, yes, as always, but courage is cheap in the young. Still, good Gryffindor stock, just like the ones before."

James' heart leaped. Then he remembered the thought he'd had standing before the dais and he faltered. *I don't have to play the game*, he thought to himself. *I don't have to be a Gryffindor*. He thought of the applause, thought of the face of the pretty girl with the long, wavy black hair, standing beneath the green and silver banner.

"Slytherin, he thinks!" the hat spoke in his head, considering. "Yes, always that possibility as well. Like his father. He'd have made a great Slytherin, but hadn't the will. Hmm, very unsure of himself is this one, and that is a first for a Potter. Lack of sureness is neither a Gryffindor nor a Slytherin trait. Perhaps Hufflepuff would do him some good..."

Not Hufflepuff, thought James. Faces swam up before him in his mind: Mum and Dad, Uncle Ron, Aunt Hermione, Gryffindors all. Then they faded and he saw the girl at the Slytherin table, smiling, applauding. He heard himself thinking, as he had thought minutes earlier, *I could be great in a different way, an intentionally different way...*

"Not Hufflepuff, hmm? Perhaps you're right. Yes, I see it now. Confused you may be, but uncertain you are not. My initial instincts are correct, as always." And then aloud, the Sorting Hat called out the name of his house.

The hat was whipped off his head, and James had actually thought he'd heard the word 'Slytherin' still echoing from the walls, actually looked with sudden horror toward the green and silver table to see them applauding, when he realized it was the table beneath the crimson lion that had jumped up and applauded. The Gryffindor table cheered loudly and raucously, and James realized how much more he liked that than the polite, practiced applause he'd gotten earlier. He leaped from the chair, ran down the steps, and was enveloped amongst the cheers. Hands patted his back and reached out to shake his and high-five him. A seat near the front opened for him and a voice spoke in his ear as the cheers finally subsided.

"Never doubted it a minute, mate," the voice whispered happily. James turned to see Ted give him a confident nod and a slap on the back before settling back to his seat. Turning back to watch the rest of the Sorting ceremony, James felt, so suddenly, perfectly happy that he thought he might split right down the middle. He didn't *have* to follow exactly in his dad's footsteps, but maybe he could start doing things deliberately differently tomorrow. For now, he gloried in the knowledge that Mum and Dad would be thrilled to know that he, like them, was a Gryffindor.

When Zane's name was called, he trotted up the steps and plopped on the chair as if he thought it was going to take him on a roller coaster ride. He grinned as the shadow of the hat fell over his head, and it had no sooner done so than the hat cried out "Ravenclaw!" Zane raised his eyebrows and rocked his head back and forth in a cheerfully mystified way that brought a peal of laughter from the crowd even as the Ravenclaws cheered and beckoned him to their table.

The rest of the first years made their way to the dais and the house tables filled out appreciably. Ralph Deedle was one of the last to climb up and sit on the chair. He seemed to shrink a bit under the hat as it thought for a surprisingly long time. Then, with a flourish of its peak, the hat announced, "Slytherin!"

James was stunned. He had been sure that at least one, if not both, of his new friends would end up seated next to him at the Gryffindor table. Neither of them had joined him, however, and one of them, the one he least expected, had become a Slytherin. Of course, he conveniently forgot that he himself had almost succeeded in getting sent there. But Ralph? A Muggle-born if ever there was one? He turned and saw Ralph seating himself at the table on the far side of the room, being patted on the back by his new housemates. The girl with the sparkling eyes and the wavy black hair was smiling again, pleasantly, welcomingly. Maybe Slytherin House had changed, he thought. Dad and Mum would hardly believe it.

Finally, Headmistress McGonagall put the Sorting Hat away. "First years," she called, "your new house is your home, but we are all your family. Let us enjoy competitions wherever we may find them, but never forget where our ultimate loyalties lie. And now," she pushed her spectacles onto her nose and addressed the crowd over them. "Announcements. As always, the Forbidden Forest is off limits to students at all times. Please be sure that this is not a merely academic preference. First years may ask any older students-- *except* for Mr. Ted Lupin and Mr. Noah Metzker, whose counsel you might wish to avoid on the matter-- what they can expect if they determine to ignore this rule."

James let the rest of the announcements roll over him as he scanned the faces of the crowd. Zane, at the Ravenclaw table, had pulled a bowl of nuts in front of him and was determinedly working his way through it. Across the room, Ralph caught James' eye and gestured wonderingly at himself and his new housemates, seeming to ask James if it was all right. James shrugged and nodded noncommittally.

“Leaving us with one last order of business,” the Headmistress finally said, to the accompaniment of a few brave cheers. “Some of you may have noticed that there is one empty chair amidst your teachers here on the dais. Rest assured that you shall have a Defense Against the Dark Arts professor and that he is indeed a uniquely qualified and gifted expert on the subject. He will be arriving tomorrow afternoon, along with a full complement of fellow teachers, students, and associates, as part of a year-long international magical summit between his school and ours. I will expect you all to turn out tomorrow afternoon in the main courtyard for the arrival of the representatives from Alma Aleron and the United States Department of Magical Administration.”

Sounds of mingled excitement and derision erupted in the hall as the students instantly turned to discuss this rather remarkable turn of events with their fellows. James heard Ted say, “What is some old Yank gonna be able to tell us about the Dark Arts? What channel to watch them on?” There was a chorus of laughter. James turned around, looking for Zane. He found him, caught his eye, and pointed at him, shrugging. *Your people are coming here*, he mouthed. Zane clapped his hand over his heart and saluted with the other.

In the midst of the debate, dinner appeared on the long tables, and James, along with the rest of Hogwarts, dug in with fervor.



It was nearly midnight by the time James made his way to the portrait of the Fat Lady marking the entrance to the Gryffindor common room.

“Password,” she sang out. James stopped short, letting his green backpack slip off his shoulder and thump to the floor. No one had told him any passwords.

“I don't know the password yet. I'm a first year. I'm a Gryffindor,” he added lamely.

“Gryffindor you may be,” said the Fat Lady, looking him up and down with an air of polite patience, “but no password, no entry.”

“Maybe you could give me a little hint this time?” James said, trying to smile winningly.

The Fat Lady stared at him levelly. “You seem to have some unfortunate misunderstanding of the nature of the term ‘password’, my dear.”

There was a commotion on the moving staircase nearby. It swung into view and settled, lurching slightly, at the end of the landing. A group of older students clambered up, laughing and shushing each other conspicuously. Ted was among them.

“Ted,” James called in relief, “I need the password. A little help?”

Ted saw James as he and the others approached. “*Genisolaris*,” he said, and then added to one of the girls in the group, “Hurry it up, Petra, and don’t let Noah’s brother see you.”

She nodded, brushing past James as the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open to reveal the fire-lit glow of the common room. James began to follow her in when Ted threw an arm around his shoulder, turning him around and bringing him back out onto the landing. “My dear James, you can’t imagine we’re going to let you toddle off to bed at such an early hour, do you? There are Gryffindor traditions to think about, for Merlin’s sake.”

“What?” James stammered. “It’s midnight. You know that, do you?”

“Commonly known in the Muggle world as ‘The Witching Hour’,” Ted said instructively. “A misnomer, of course, but ‘The Witching and Wizarding Pulling Tricks on Unsuspecting Muggle Country Folk Hour’ is just a bit too long for anyone to remember. We like to call it, simply, ‘Raising the Wocket’.”

Ted was leading James back toward the stairs, along with three other Gryffindors. “The what?” James asked, trying to keep up.

“Boy doesn’t know what the Wocket is,” Ted said mournfully to the rest of the group. “And his dad’s the owner of the famous Marauder’s Map. Just think how much easier this would be if we could get our hands on *that* bit of skullduggery. James, let me introduce you to the rest of the Gremlins, a group you may indeed hope to join, depending on how things go tonight, of course.” Ted stopped, turned and threw his arm wide, indicating the three others skulking along with them. “My number one, Noah Metzker, whose only flaw is his unwitting relationship to his fifth-year prefect brother.” Noah bowed curtly at the waist, grinning. “Our treasurer,” Ted continued, “if we ever manage to come across any coin, Sabrina Hildegard.” A pleasant faced girl with a spray of freckles and a quill stuck in her thick reddish hair nodded to James. “Our scapegoat, should such services ever be required, young Damien Damascus,” Ted gripped the shoulder of a stout boy with heavy glasses and a pumpkin-like face who grimaced at him and growled. “And finally, my alibi, my perfect foil, everyone’s favorite teacher’s favorite, Ms. Petra Morganstern.” Ted gestured affectionately to the girl who was just returning from the portrait hole, stuffing something small into her jeans

pocket. James noticed that everyone but him had changed out of their robes and into jeans and dark sweatshirts. “Is everything clear for takeoff?” Ted asked Petra as she met them.

“Affirmative. All systems go, Captain,” she replied, and there was a titter from Damien. They all turned and began to descend the staircase, Ted steering James along with them.

“Should I go change or something?” he asked, his voice shaking as he pounded down the stairs.

Ted gave him an appraising look. “No, I don’t think that’ll be necessary in your case. Relax, mate. You’re going to have a blast. So to speak. Jump just here, then. You don’t want to step on *that* step, mind you.” James jumped, his backpack swinging from his shoulder, feeling himself pulled along partly by the group’s enthusiasm, but mostly by Ted’s grip on his elbow. He landed on the floor of a long, torch lit corridor and stumbled to keep up. At the end of the hall, the group met three more students, all standing in the shadow thrown by a statue of a gigantic, hunchbacked wizard wearing a very tall hat.

“Good evening, fellow Gremlins,” Ted whispered as they all clustered together in the shadow of the statue. “Meet James, son of my godfather, some guy named Harry Potter.” James grinned sheepishly at the new faces, and then did a double take at the third face in the group. “James, meet our Ravenclaw chapter, Horace, Gennifer, and young whatsisname.” He turned to Gennifer. “What’s his name?” he asked, gesturing at the boy on the end.

“Zane,” Gennifer said, throwing an arm around the smaller boy, who grinned and let himself be playfully shaken. “Just met him tonight, but he’s got a little something that says Gremlin to me. I’m thinking there might be some imp in his lineage somewhere.”

“We’re gonna play Hunt the Wocket!” Zane said to James in a stage whisper that carried along the entire corridor. “Sounds iffy to me, but if this’ll make us cool, well, I figured we might as well get it out of the way straight off!” James couldn’t tell if Zane was joking, and then he realized it didn’t really matter.

“*Raise* the Wocket,” Noah corrected.

James decided it was time to impress himself upon the conversation. “So where is this Wocket? And why are we all crammed into a corner behind a statue?”

“This isn’t just any old statue,” Petra said as Ted shimmied as far between the statue and the wall as he could, apparently looking for something. “This is St. Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive. We only learned his story last year and it led us to a rather amazing discovery.”

“Led *you*, you mean,” Ted said, his voice muffled.

Petra considered this and nodded. “True enough,” she agreed matter-of-factly.

“Back in your father’s day,” Noah said as Ted scratched around behind the statue, “there were six secret passages in and out of Hogwarts. But that was before the Battle. After that, a lot of the castle was

rebuilt, and all the old secret passages were permanently sealed off. Funny thing about a magical castle, though. It just seems to grow new secret passages. We've only found two, and those only because of Petra and our Ravenclaw friends here. St. Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive is one of them. It's all right there in his slogan."

Noah pointed to the words engraved into the statue's base: *Igitur Qui Moveo, Qui et Movea.*

Ted made a grunt of triumph and there was a loud click. "You'll never guess where it was this time," he said, puffing from beneath the statue. With a grind of moving stone, the statue of St. Lokimagus straightened up as much as his humped back would allow, stepped carefully off his plinth, and then walked across the corridor with a slightly bowlegged gait. He disappeared into the door opposite, which James saw was a boys' bathroom.

"What's his slogan mean?" James asked as the Gremlins began to duck hurriedly into the low doorway on the back of St. Lokimagus' plinth. Noah grinned and shrugged. "When you gotta go, you gotta go."

The passage led to a short stairway with rounded stone steps. The Gremlins pounded noisily up the steps, and then shushed each other as they reached a doorway. Ted creaked the door open a fraction, peering through the crack. A moment later he pushed the door wide and motioned for the rest to follow him outside.

The door opened inexplicably out of a small shed near what James recognized as the Quidditch pitch. The tall grandstands rose into the moonlight, looking bleak and imposing in the silence.

"The passage only works one way," Sabrina explained to James and Zane as the group ran lightly across the Quidditch pitch toward the hills beyond. "If you go into it without having come through St. Lokimagus' tunnel first you just find yourself in the equipment shed. Pretty convenient, since it means that even if we get caught, nobody else can chase us back through the tunnel."

"*Have* you gotten caught yet?" James asked, puffing along next to her.

"No, but this is the first time we've tried to use it. We only discovered it at the end of last year." She shrugged as if to say *we'll see how this turns out, won't we?*

Zane's voice came out of the darkness behind James, conversationally. "What if St. Magic Buns gets done with the loo before we all come back through his hole?" James shuddered at Zane's turn of phrase, but admired his logic. It seemed like a question worth asking.

"That's definitely a question for a Ravenclaw," Noah called back as quietly as he could, but nobody answered.

After ten minutes of skirting the border of a scraggly, moonlit wood, the group clambered over a wire fence into a field. Ted pulled his wand from his back pocket as he approached a patch of rambling bushes

and weeds. James followed and saw that there was a low barn hidden among the growth. It was ramshackle, bowed and buried in vines.

“*Alohomora*,” Ted said, pointing his wand at the large rusted padlock hanging on the door. There was a flash of yellow light. It bloomed out of the lock, and then resolved into the shape of a glowing, ghostly arm that snaked from the padlock’s keyhole. The arm ended in a fist with the index finger pointed in the air. It wagged the finger back and forth reprovingly for a few seconds, and then vanished.

“Protective charm’s still in place, then,” Ted announced happily. He turned to Petra, who came forward, pulling something out of her jeans pocket. James saw it was a rusted skeleton key.

“That was Gennifer’s idea,” Horace, the second Ravenclaw, said proudly. “Although I had wanted it to be a different gesture.”

“Would’ve been a nice touch,” Zane agreed.

“We figured any magical types that tried to break in here wouldn’t think to try anything as boring as a key,” Noah explained. “We put up Disillusionment Charms to keep the Muggles away, but they don’t come out here anyway. It’s abandoned.”

Petra turned the key and pulled away the padlock. The doors of the old barn swung open with surprising silence. “Creaky doors are for novices,” Damien said smugly, tapping the side of his pug nose.

James peered inside. There was something large in the shadows, its bulk blotting out the rear of the barn. He could just barely make out the shape of it. More than anything, it looked like somebody’s very antiquated idea of a flying saucer.

“Cool!” Zane cried happily, understanding dawning on him. “Raise the *Wocket!* You’re right, James. There was nothing like *this* in *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“The Wizard of what?” Ted said to James out of the corner of his mouth.

“It’s a Muggle thing,” James replied. “We wouldn’t understand.”



Frank Tottington awoke suddenly, sure he'd heard something out in the garden. He was instantly alert and angry, throwing off his covers and swinging his legs out of bed as if he'd fully expected such an annoyance.

"Hmwah?" his wife mumbled, raising her head sleepily.

"It's those dratted Grindle kids out in our garden," Frank announced gruffly, jamming his feet into his tartan slippers. "Didn't I tell you they were sneaking in at night, trampling my begonias and stealing my tomatoes? Kids!" he spat. He shrugged into a threadbare robe. It flapped about his shins as he clumped down the stairs and grabbed his shotgun off the hook by the back door.

The screen door squeaked open and clapped against the outside wall as Frank barreled out. "All right, you hooligans! Drop those tomatoes and step out here into the light where I can see you!" He raised the shotgun in one hand, pointing it warningly at the star-strewn sky.

A light popped on over his head, illuminating him in a blinding white beam that seemed to hum faintly. Frank froze, his shotgun still held barrel up, pointing up into the beam of light. Slowly, Frank raised his head, squinting, his stubbly chin casting a long shadow down the front of his robe. There was something hovering over him. It was hard to tell the size of it. It was simply a round black shape, with dim lights dotting the edge. It was turning slowly and appeared to be lowering.

Frank gasped, stumbled and nearly dropped his gun. He recovered and backed quickly away, not taking his eyes from the gently humming object. It lowered slowly, as if cushioned by the beam of light, and as it came to rest, its hum deepened, throbbing.

Frank boggled at it, his knobby knees bent in a sort of alert crouch. He chewed on his dentures fretfully.

Then, with a burst of steam and a hiss, the shape of a door appeared in the side of the object. It was outlined in light, and the light brightened as the door unfolded, forming a short ramp. A figure was standing framed in the light. Frank gasped and raised his shotgun, socking it to his shoulder. There was a blast of red light and Frank jumped. He made to pull the trigger, but nothing happened. The trigger had changed, become a small button instead of the comforting loop of metal. He glanced down at the shotgun, and then held it out in front of him in shock. It wasn't his shotgun at all. It was a small, ratty umbrella with a fake wooden handle. He'd never seen it before. Recognizing he was in the presence of something truly otherworldly, Frank dropped the umbrella and sank to his knees.

The figure in the doorway was small and thin. Its skin was a purplish green, its large head was nearly featureless, with the suggestion of large, almond-shaped eyes barely visible in the glare of light from the open hatchway. It began to walk down the ramp toward Frank, and its footsteps seemed unusually careful, almost awkward. It ducked slightly to clear the doorway, then, suddenly the figure tripped on the lip of the hatch. It stumbled forward, pinwheeling its arms, and seemed about to throw itself upon Frank. He scrambled

backwards desperately, terrified. The small figure toppled forward, its disproportionately large head zooming towards Frank, filling his vision.

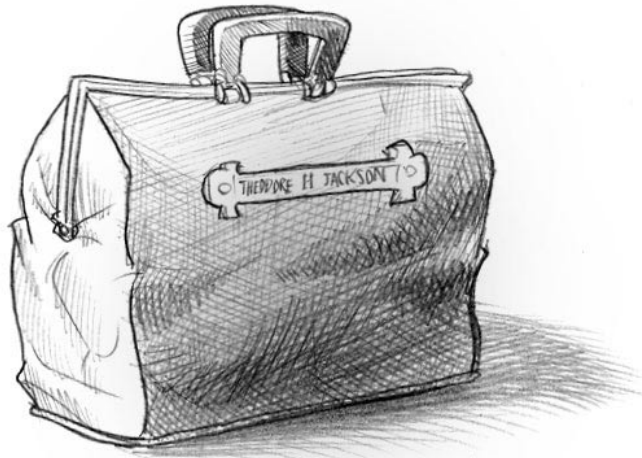
In the moment before Frank blacked out, he was distracted only by the rather strange fact that the figure seemed to be wearing, if nothing else, a fairly ordinary dark green backpack slung over its shoulders. Frank fainted with a look of rather worried confusion on his face.



James awoke blearily the next morning. He pried his eyes open, taking in the unfamiliar shapes of his surroundings. He was in a four-poster bed in a large, round room with a low ceiling. Sunlight beamed cheerily in, lighting more beds, most of which were disheveled and empty. Slowly, like owls coming in to roost, he remembered the previous night: the Sorting Hat, standing before the portrait of the Fat Lady and not knowing the Gryffindor password, meeting Ted, and then the rest of the Gremlins.

He sat up in bed quickly, reaching for his face. He patted his cheeks, his brow, the shape of his eyes, and then sighed with relief. Everything appeared to be back to normal. Something flopped onto his bed next to him, a newspaper James didn't recognize. It was turned to an article with the headline: 'Local Man Insists Martian Rockets Steal His Tomatoes'. James glanced up. Noah Metzker was standing at the foot of his bed, a wry look on his face.

"They misspelled 'Wocket' again," he said.



2. ARRIVAL OF THE ALMA ALERONS

By the time James had dressed and made his way down to the Great Hall for breakfast, it was nearly ten o'clock. Less than a dozen students could be seen moving disconsolately among the detritus of the morning's earlier rush. At the far corner of the Slytherin table, Zane sat hunched and squinting under a beam of sunlight. Across from him was Ralph, who saw James enter and waved him over.

As James made his way across the Hall, four or five house-elves, each wearing large linen napkins with the Hogwarts crest embroidered on them, circled the tables, meandering in what at first appeared to be random paths. Occasionally, one of them would duck beneath the surface of a table and then reappear a moment later, tossing a stray fork or half a biscuit casually onto the mess of the table. As James passed one of the elves, it straightened, raised its spindly arms, and then brought them swiftly down. The contents on the table in front of him swirled together as if caught in a miniature cyclone. With a great clattering of dishes and silverware, the corners of the tablecloth shot upwards and twisted around the pile of breakfast debris, creating a huge clanking bag floating improbably over the polished wood table. The house-elf leaped from floor to bench to tabletop, and then jumped, turning in midair and landing lightly on top of the bag. It grasped the twisted top of the bag, using the knot as if it were a set of reins, and turned the bag, driving it bobblingly toward the gigantic service doors in the side of the Hall. James ducked as the bag swooped over his head.

"Phew," Zane muttered as James plopped down next to him and reached for the last piece of toast. "These little waiters of yours may be weird-lookin' buggers, but they know how to make a good cup of coffee."

“They’re not waiters, they’re house-elves. I read about them yesterday,” Ralph said, happily munching half a sausage. The other half was speared on the end of his fork, which he used like a pointer, indicating the elves. “They work downstairs. They’re like the elves in that kids’ story. The ones that came at night and did all the work for the cobbler.”

“The what?” Zane asked over his coffee mug.

“The guy that makes shoes. He had all these shoes half finished and just lying around, and he was about to fall over from all the work. You know that story, don’t you? So he falls asleep, and in the middle of the night, all these little elves show up and whip out their hammers and go to town, fixing up all the shoes for him. He wakes up and bammo, everything’s cool.” Ralph bit the rest of the sausage off his fork and munched it, looking around. “I never pictured them wearing napkins, though.”

“Hey, alien-boy, I see your face is back to normal,” Zane said, examining James critically.

“What passes for it, I suppose,” James replied.

“Did it hurt at all when Sabrina zapped you?”

“No,” James said. “It felt weird. *Really* weird. But it didn’t hurt. It just went back to normal overnight.”

“She must be an artist. You looked great. Webbed feet and all.”

“What are you two talking about?” Ralph asked, looking back and forth between them. They told him all about the previous night, about raising the Wocket, and the farmer who’d fainted when James, the little alien, had stumbled and fallen on top of him.

“I was hiding in the corner of the yard, near the shed, and I about gave myself a hernia trying not to laugh when you tackled him. Attack of the Martian Klutzes!” He dissolved into laughter and after a moment, James joined him.

“Where’d they get the spaceship?” Ralph asked, bypassing the humor.

“It’s just a bunch of chicken wire and papier-mâché,” Zane said, downing the last of his coffee and clapping the mug onto the table. He raised his arm and snapped his fingers twice. “Sabrina and Horace made it last year as part of a float for a Christmas parade down in Hogsmeade. It used to be a giant cauldron. Now, with the help of some paint and something Gennifer called a ‘*Visum-ineptio* charm’, it’s the R.M.S. Wocket.”

A very small house-elf approached Zane, frowning. “You, er, *snapped*, young master?” The elf’s voice was gratefully deep despite his size.

“Here you go, buddy,” Zane said, handing the elf the empty coffee mug. “Nice work. Keep it up. This is for you.”

The elf looked down at the piece of paper Zane had just handed him. He raised his eyes again. “Thank you, young master. Will there, er, be anything else?”

Zane flapped his hand dismissively. “No, thanks. Go get some sleep or something. You look tired.”

The elf looked at Ralph, then James, who shrugged and tried to smile. With a barely perceptible roll of the eyes, the elf tucked the five dollar bill into his napkin and disappeared under the table.

Zane looked thoughtful. “I could get used to this.”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to tip the house-elves,” Ralph said uncertainly.

“I don’t see why not,” Zane said airily, stretching. “My dad tips everybody when he’s travelling. He says it’s part of the local economy. And it fosters good service.”

“And you can’t just tell a house-elf to go get some sleep,” James said, suddenly realizing what had just happened.

“Why the heck not?”

“Because that’s exactly what he’ll have to go and do!” James said in exasperation. He was thinking of the Potter family house-elf, a sad little pug of an elf whose moroseness was only offset by his sheer bloody-minded determination to do exactly what was asked of him. It wasn’t that James didn’t like Kreacher. It was just that you had to learn precisely *how* to ask things of Kreacher. “House-elves have to do what is asked of them by their masters. It’s just the kind of beings they are. He’s probably heading back to his cupboard, or shelf, or wherever it is he sleeps even now and trying to work out how he’s going to sleep in the middle of the morning.” James shook his head, and then realized it struck him funny. He tried not to smile, which only made it worse. Zane saw it and pointed at him.

“Ha ha! You think it’s funny, too!” he chortled.

“I can’t imagine that they have to do everything *we* ask of them,” Ralph said, his brow furrowed. “We’re just students. We don’t own the place or anything. And we’re just first years.”

“You remembered the name of the spell Sabrina used to make the Wocket look like a rocket?” James asked, turning to Zane, impressed.

“*Visum-ineptio*,” Zane said, relishing the sound of it. “It means something like ‘eye-fooling’. If you work through the Latin, you can sort of figure it out. Horace says it just helps people see what they think they are going to see.”

James frowned. “So when that beam of light came out of the sky onto that farmer, he, sort of, *expected* to see an alien spaceship?”

“Sure. *Everybody* knows that a beam of light, at night, in the middle of nowhere means the little green guys are coming.”

“You’re a strange guy, Zane,” Ralph said, not unappreciatively.

Just then, James sensed someone standing behind him. All three of them turned, looking up. It was the Slytherin girl from the previous night, the one who’d led the applause for James before his Sorting. She was looking down at him with a pleasant, vaguely indulgent expression. She was flanked by two other Slytherins, a boy with handsome, rather sharp features whose smile showed an awful load of teeth, and another girl, who wasn’t smiling. Heat rushed to James’ cheeks as he remembered he was sitting at the Slytherin table. Before he could think, he scrambled to get up, a chunk of toast still sticking out of his mouth.

“No, no!” the pretty Slytherin girl said, raising her hand toward him, palm out, stopping him in his tracks almost as if she’d used magic. “Don’t stand. I’m happy to see you feel comfortable enough to sit at the Slytherin table with us. These are quite different times than those of your father. But I assume too much. Mr. Deedle, would you be so kind as to introduce me to your friend?”

Ralph coughed, clearing his throat in embarrassment. “Uh, this is my friend, James Potter. And this is Zane. I forget his last name. Sorry.” He said the last to Zane, who shrugged, grinned at Ralph, then jumped to his feet and reached across the table to shake the Slytherin girl’s hand.

“Walker. Zane Walker. It is a distinct and heartfelt pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms...”

The girl’s smile broadened a tiny bit and she tilted her head, still looking at Ralph.

“Oh!” Ralph said, jumping a bit. “Yes. This is, um, Tabitha Corsica. She’s a prefect in Slytherin House, a sixth year, I think. Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch Team. And the debate team. And, um... she has a really cool broom.” Having exhausted himself of everything he could think of to say about her, Ralph slumped as if exhausted.

Tabitha finally accepted Zane’s hand, holding it lightly, then releasing it. “I’m glad to have officially made your acquaintances. Mr. Potter, or may I call you James?” she said, turning to him. Her voice was like silver bells and velvet, lower than James’ own, but rather beautiful. He realized she’d asked him a question, shook himself, and answered.

“Yeah. Sure. James.”

“And I’d be delighted if you’d call me Tabitha,” she said, smiling as if this gesture of familiarity pleased her immensely. “I’d just like to say, on behalf of Slytherin House, that we are glad you are among us, and we hope sincerely that any remaining,” she glanced upwards with her eyes, considering, “*prejudices* will be left in the past, where they forever belong.” She turned left and right, encompassing the two Slytherins with her. “We all have nothing but the highest respect and, yes, regard for you and your father. Can we, I hope, expect to all be friends?”

The boy on Tabitha's right continued to smile down at James. The girl on her left studied a spot on the table somewhere between them, her face expressionless.

"S-sure. Friends. Of course," James stammered. The silence of the rest of the hall seemed a huge thing. It swallowed his voice, made it tiny.

Tabitha's smile warmed even further. Her green eyes twinkled. "I'm pleased that you agree. And now we will leave you to finish your, er, breakfasts. Tom? Philia?"

The three turned on the spot and swept away down the aisle.

"What did you just agree to?" Ralph asked as they stood and followed the Slytherins at a careful distance.

"I think James here has either just made a gorgeous friend or a sultry enemy," Zane said, watching the swoop and drape of Tabitha's robes as she turned the corner. "I can't say for sure which I am rooting for."

James was thinking hard. Things certainly had changed a lot since Dad's and Mum's day. He just couldn't quite tell if they were, in fact, better.



The three of them spent the rest of the morning exploring the school grounds. They visited the Quidditch pitch, which looked to Zane and James remarkably different in the bright, hazy sunlight than it had in the dark. Zane's mouth fell open when he saw a group of older students playing a scratch three-on-three Quidditch match. The players swooped in and out of formations, barely missing each other, calling out plays and occasional swear words.

"Brutal!" Zane proclaimed happily as one of the players walloped a Bludger at an opposing player's head, knocking him into a barrel roll around his broomstick. "And *I've* been to a *rugby* match."

They passed Hagrid's cottage, which looked empty and dark, with no smoke in the chimney and the door shut tight. Shortly after, they ran into Ted Lupin and Noah Metzker, who led them to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A gigantic, ancient-looking willow tree dominated the edge of the clearing. Ted held out his arm, stopping Ralph as he moved toward it.

“Close enough, mate,” he said. “Watch this.”

Ted loosened the mouth of a large laundry bag he’d been dragging behind him. Out of it, he produced an object shaped roughly like a four-legged animal with wings and a beak. It was covered in multicolored scraps of paper whose colors shifted and swam in the light breeze.

“No! It’s a piñata!” Zane exclaimed. “In the shape of a... a... don’t tell me! A... sphinxoraptor!”

“It’s a hippogriff,” James said, laughing.

“I like his name better,” Ralph said.

“Me too!” Noah added.

“Silence!” said Ted, raising his hand. He lifted the piñata in his other hand, hefted it, and then threw it as hard as he could into the curtain of branches hanging from the willow. It vanished into the dense foliage, and for a moment, nothing else happened. Then there was a rustle among the whiplike branches. They writhed, as if something large was moving beneath them. Suddenly, the tree exploded into a violent flurry of motion. Its branches flailed wildly, slapping, groaning, and creaking. The noise it made was like a very localized windstorm. After a few seconds, the piñata was caught up visibly in the branches. The tree embraced it in dozens of coiling, angry whips, and then all of the branches pulled at once. It was as if the piñata had been dropped into a blender. Shreds of multicolored paper and wizard candy exploded as the ballistics charm core of the piñata triggered. Confetti and candies peppered the tree and the surrounding clearing. The tree thrashed in apparent annoyance at the sudden colorful mess in its branches, then seemed to give up. It settled into its original shape.

Ted and Noah laughed uproariously. “Behold the death of the Sphinxoraptor!” Noah proclaimed. James had heard about the Whomping Willow, but was still impressed by both its violence and the other Gryffindors’ casualness about it. Zane and Ralph simply stared, mouths agape. Without looking, Ralph plucked an Every Flavor Bean out of his hair and stuck it in his mouth. He chewed meditatively for a moment, and then glanced at James. “Tastes like taco! Cool!”

James separated himself from the group a little later and made his way up the stairs to the landing outside the Gryffindor common room.

“Password,” the Fat Lady sang out as he approached.

“*Genisolaris*,” he replied, hoping it hadn’t changed already.

“Proceed,” the painting answered, swinging open.

The common room was empty, the fireplace cold. James ascended to the sleeping chamber and headed for his bed. He was already feeling a warm sense of belonging in this room, even in its dozing, midday emptiness. The beds had been neatly made. Nobby, James’ huge, brown barn owl, was sleeping in

his cage with his head tucked under his wing. James flopped onto the bed, took a sheaf of parchment and a quill, and began to write, being careful not to spill ink onto the blankets.

Dear Mum and Dad,

Arrived last night with no problems. Met some cool new friends so far. Ralph turned out to be a Slytherin, which I'd have never guessed. Zane is a Ravenclaw, and he's about as crazy as Uncle George. They're both Muggle-born, so I'm learning a lot even though classes haven't started yet. With their help, Muggle Studies should be a breeze. Ted showed us the Whomping Willow, but we didn't get too close, Mum. Some new teachers here. Saw Neville yesterday, but didn't have a chance to give him your greeting. Oh, and a delegation of American wizards and such is arriving later today. Should be interesting since Zane is from the States himself. Long story. More later.

Your son,

James

P.S. I'm a Gryffindor!

James smiled proudly as he folded and sealed the letter. He'd debated about the best way to announce his house to Mum and Dad (and everybody else, since they'd all be waiting to hear about it from his parents), and had decided that just saying it straight up would be best. Anything else would have seemed either too casual or unnecessarily grand.

"Hey, Nobby," James whispered. The bird raised its head halfway, revealing one great orange eye. "Got a message for you to deliver. How about a nice fly home, hmm?"

Nobby stretched, ruffled his feathers so that he seemed to double in size for a moment, and then stuck out his leg. James opened Nobby's cage and attached the letter. The owl sidled carefully to the window, unfolded his wings, hunched, and then launched himself easily into the bright daylight beyond the window. James, feeling almost absurdly happy, watched until Nobby was a speck between the distant blue mountain peaks. Whistling, he turned and ran noisily down the stairs.

He had lunch at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall and then met up afterwards with Zane and Ralph as the rest of the school began to assemble in the main courtyard. A small student orchestra had assembled to play the American national anthem upon the arrival of the United States delegation. The cacophony as they tuned their instruments was deafening. Zane commented with conviction that it was the first time he'd ever heard *The Star-Spangled Banner* played on bagpipes and accordion. Students milled and congregated, filling the courtyard. Finally, Professor Longbottom and another professor who James didn't

know yet began to move among the crowd, pressing the students into orderly arrangements along the walls. James, Zane, and Ralph found themselves near the great front gates, watching for the arrival of the Americans with growing anticipation. James remembered the stories his parents had told of the arrival of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang delegations back when the Triwizard Tournament had been held at Hogwarts: the gigantic horses and flying carriage of the one and the mysterious submarine galleon of the other. He couldn't help wondering how the Americans might choose to arrive.

The gathered throng watched and waited, voices hushed. The student orchestra stood on a small tiered grandstand, instruments held at the ready, blinking in the hazy afternoon sunlight. Headmistress McGonagall and the rest of the teaching staff stood, watching the sky, arranged along the portico which led into the main hall.

Finally, someone pointed and voices called out. All eyes turned, straining. James squinted into the golden haze over the distant mountain peaks. A dot resolved, growing larger as it approached. As he watched, two more became visible, closely following the first. Sounds drifted into the courtyard, apparently coming from the approaching objects. James glanced at Zane, who shrugged, obviously mystified. The sound was a low, droning roar, growing quickly louder. The objects must have been moving at a great speed because they were already swooping down, taking on shape as they approached the courtyard. The sound of them became lower, vibrating, a beating thrum as of giant insect wings. James watched as the objects slowed appreciably, lowering to meet their shadows on the courtyard lawn.

“Cool!” Zane called out over the sound of them. “They’re cars!”

James had heard about his grandfather Weasley's enchanted Ford Anglia, flown once by his dad and Uncle Ron to Hogwarts, where it took refuge in the Forbidden Forest and was never seen again. These weren't like that at all. One difference was that, unlike the photos James had seen of the Anglia, these cars were shiny and immaculate, with chrome accents throwing darts of sunlight all around the courtyard. The other difference, which produced a sustained sigh of appreciation from the gathered Hogwartians, was the wings which folded out of the rear half of each vehicle. They were exactly like giant insect wings, thrumming loudly, catching the sunlight in blurring rainbow-colored fans.

“That's a Dodge Hornet!” Zane called, pointing at the first one as it landed. Its front wheels touched down first and rolled slightly forward as the rest of the car settled behind them. It had two doors, and was a fierce yellow color, with long wasplike wings. The second, according to Zane, who seemed to be an expert on the subject, was a Stutz Dragonfly. It was bottle-green, low and long, with swooping fenders and chrome pipes curling from its tapered hood. Its wings were also long and tapered, making a deep, beating drone James could feel in his chest. Finally, the last one landed, and James didn't need Zane to identify it. Even he knew what a Volkswagen Beetle was. Its bulbous body rocked back and forth as the flaming red car descended, its stubby wings thrumming underneath two hard outer wings which were unfolded from the back of the car just like a real beetle. It settled onto its wheels as if they were landing gear, and the wings stopped thrumming, folded delicately, and disappeared beneath the hard outer wings, which closed over them.

The Hogwartians erupted into a great, exhilarated cheer at the same moment that the orchestra began to play the anthem. Behind James, a girl's voice scoffed over the noise, "Americans and their machines."

Zane turned to her. "That last one's German. I'd have thought you'd known that." He grinned at her, then turned away, enjoying the applause.

As the Hogwarts band plodded its way through the anthem, the doors of the cars opened and the American delegation began to emerge. Three identically dressed adult wizards appeared first, one from each car. They wore dark, thigh-length grey-green cloaks, black vests over high white collars, and loose grey pants that gathered just above their white socks and shiny black shoes. They stood for half a minute, blinking and frowning about them as if surveying the crowd. Apparently satisfied with the security level of the courtyard, the men stepped away from the open doors of each vehicle and assumed guard positions nearby. James could see a bit into the open door of the nearest car, the Beetle, and wasn't surprised at the disproportionately large and sumptuous interior. Figures moved inside, and then the view was blocked as they began to climb out of the car.

The number of figures that emerged from the cars surprised even James, who'd camped inside wizard tents on many occasions and knew how flexible wizard spaces could be. Porters in burgundy cloaks moved to the boots of each vehicle, producing small flat carts and unloading innumerable trunks and cases onto them, forming dizzying, swaying piles. Young wizards and witches in surprisingly casual robes, some even wearing jeans and sunglasses, began to fill the center of the courtyard. Official-looking adult witches and wizards followed, their light grey cloaks and charcoal tunics identifying them as the members of the American Department of Magical Administration. They gravitated, smiling, hands outstretched, toward the portico, where Headmistress McGonagall and the staff were descending to meet them.

The last to emerge from the cars were also adults, although their variety of dress and ages implied they were neither department officials nor students. James guessed these were the teachers of Alma Aleron, the American wizarding school. There appeared to be one per car. The one nearest, climbing from the Beetle, was as stout as a barrel, with long grey hair parted to frame a pleasant, blocky face. He wore tiny, square glasses and smiled with an air of vaguely arrogant benevolence at the Hogwartians. Something about him rang a faint bell in James' memory, but he couldn't quite place it. James turned, looking for the second professor, and found him emerging from the Stutz Dragonfly. He was very tall, white-haired, with a long, grey face, unsmiling and severe. He surveyed the crowd, his bushy black eyebrows working on the slab of his forehead like a pair of caterpillars. A porter appeared next to him and held out a black leather case. Without looking, the professor grasped the handles of the case in a great knobby-knuckled hand and moved forward, approaching the portico like a ship under full sail.

"I'm making it my New Year's resolution to avoid any classes with that guy," Zane said gravely. Ralph and James nodded.

James found the third professor from Alma Aleron just as she was climbing slowly, imperiously out of the Dodge Hornet. She raised herself to her full height and turned her head slowly, as if examining each face

in the crowd. James gasped, and without thinking, ducked down behind Ralph's bulky form as her gaze moved over the crowd. Carefully, he peeked over Ralph's shoulder.

"What're you doing?" Ralph asked, straining to see James out of the corner of his eye.

James squinted through the crowd over Ralph's shoulder. The woman wasn't looking at him at all. She didn't appear to be looking at anything, precisely, despite the scrutinizing expression on her face. "That tall lady over there. The one with the scarf tied down over her head. I saw her the other night on the lake!"

Zane stood on tiptoe. "The one over there that looks like a gypsy mummy?"

"Yeah," James said, suddenly feeling foolish. The scarfed lady looked a lot older than he remembered. Her eyes were a dull grey, her dark face bony and lined. A porter handed her a large wooden cane and she accepted it with a nod. She began to make her way across the crowded courtyard slowly, tapping the cane ahead of her as if feeling her way.

"Looks to me like she's blind as the proverbial bat," Zane said doubtfully. "Maybe it was an alligator you saw in the lake instead of her. It'd be an easy mistake."

"You guys know who that other teacher is?" Ralph suddenly interjected in a low, awed voice, indicating the stout man in the square spectacles. "That's...! That's...! He's the five... no! Wait, the fifty...!" he babbled.

Zane looked at the portico, frowning. "The little dude with the John Lennon glasses and the weird little ruffled collar?"

"Yes!" Ralph rasped excitedly, beckoning to Zane as if trying to pull the man's name out of his head. "That's... oh, whosname! He's money!"

"How surprisingly hip of you to say so, Ralph," Zane said, slapping Ralph on the back.

Just then, Professor McGonagall touched her wand to her throat and spoke, magnifying her voice so that it echoed throughout the courtyard. "Students, faculty and staff of Hogwarts, please join me in welcoming the representatives of Alma Aleron and the United States Department of Magical Administration."

Another burst of perfunctory applause filled the courtyard. Someone in the student orchestra, mistaking the announcement as a cue, began to play the American anthem again. Three or four other musicians joined in, hurriedly trying to catch up, before they were silenced by Professor Flitwick's frantic waving.

"Esteemed guests of Hogwarts," the Headmistress continued, nodding at the crowd of newcomers, "thank you for joining us. We all look greatly forward to a year of mutual learning and cultural exchange with such long-standing and steadfast allies as our friends from the United States. And now, representatives

from Alma Aleron, if you would be so kind as to step forward so that we may introduce you to your new pupils.”

James assumed that the tall professor with the steely features would be the leader, but this was not so. The stout wizard with the square glasses approached the portico and bowed gallantly to the Headmistress. He turned and addressed the crowd without using his wand, his clear tenor voice carrying expertly, as if speaking in public was something he was quite used to.

“Students of Hogwarts, faculty and friends, thank you for such a warm welcome. We’ve come to expect no less, though I assure you that we require nothing so grand.” He smiled and winked to the crowd. “We are thrilled to be a part of your schooling this year, and let me assure you that the learning will certainly go both ways. I could, at this point, stand up here in the sun and regale you with endlessly impressive anecdotes of all the assorted similarities and differences between the European and American magical worlds, and I promise that such a diatribe would be, of course, endlessly engaging...” Again, the smile and the feeling of a mutual, inside joke. “But, as I can see that my own delegation of students are eager to rid themselves as quickly as possible of our administration for the afternoon, I can only assume that the same is true of our new Hogwarts friends. Thus, I shall merely provide the necessary introductions so that you may know who will be teaching what, and then release you all to your assorted devices.”

“I like this guy already,” James heard Ted say from somewhere behind him.

“In no particular order,” the stout wizard called out, “let me introduce Mr. Theodore Hirshall Jackson, Professor of Technomancy and Applied Magic. He is also a three-star general in the Salem-Dirgus Free Militia, so I’d advise you all to call him ‘sir’ as many times as possible whenever you address him.”

Professor Jackson’s face was as impassive as granite, as if he had long since grown impervious to his associate’s joking. He bowed slowly and gracefully, his chin raised and his dark eyes hovering somewhere over the crowd.

“Next to him,” the stout professor continued, gesturing expansively with one arm, “Professor of Divination, Advanced Enchantments, and Remote Parapsychology, Desdemona Delacroix. She also makes a rather, er, *intimidatingly* delicious gumbo, although you’ll consider yourselves very fortunate indeed if you are allowed to taste it.”

The dark woman with the scarf over her hair smiled at the speaker, and the smile transformed her face from that of a skeletal hag to something resembling a desiccated but pleasantly mischievous grandmother. She turned and her blind eyes roved, unfocussed, over the crowd, crinkling as she smiled. James wondered how he could have thought that blind, milky gaze had been the same one he’d seen piercing him through the darkness across the lake the evening before. Besides, she’d just arrived, he reasoned. She couldn’t even have been there the night before.

“And finally,” the stout professor said, “last and, quite possibly, least, allow me to introduce myself. Your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, head of the Alma Aleron debate team, and unofficial, but

very willing, wizard chess contender, Benjamin Amadeus Franklyn, at your service.” He bowed deeply, arms wide, his stringy grey hair drooping.

“That’s who I was trying to think of!” Ralph whispered harshly. “He’s on your money, you goon!” He elbowed Zane in the ribs, nearly knocking the smaller boy off his feet.



Minutes later, James, Zane, and Ralph were pounding up the stairs toward the Ravenclaw common room.

“Benjamin Franklin?” Zane repeated disbelievingly. “That can’t be the original Ben Franklin. He’d be…” He thought for a moment, frowning. “Well, I don’t know how old, but he’d be really, really old. Crazy old. Older than McGonagall even. No way.”

Ralph wheezed, trying to keep up. “I’m telling you, I think these wizard types--*us* wizard types--have ways of sticking around for a long time. It’s not all that surprising when you think about it. Ben Franklin almost seems like a wizard when you read about him in the Muggle history books. I mean, the guy caught lightning with a key on a kite string.”

James was thoughtful. “I remember my Aunt Hermione telling me about some old wizard they learned about in their first year. Nicholas Flannel or something. He’d made a sort of stone that made him live forever, or close to it. Of course, it was the sort of thing that always seemed to be falling into the wrong hands, so eventually he destroyed it and ended up dying just like everybody else. Still, I think there probably are lots of ways for witches and wizards to prolong life for a long time, even without Flannel’s stone.”

“Maybe you should get his autograph on one of your hundred dollar bills,” Ralph mused to Zane.

“I don’t have any hundreds. I gave my last five to that elf doorman downstairs. It was all I had.”

“He wasn’t a doorman!” James tried again to convince Zane.

“Well? He got the door for us,” Zane said placidly.

“Ralph knocked him over when he shoved it open! He wasn’t trying to open it *for* us!”

“Well, I’m out of money anyway. I just hope the service doesn’t suffer.”

Zane stopped in front of the door to the Ravenclaw common room. The eagle door knocker spoke in a high, trilling voice. “What is the significance of the hat in magical mastery?”

“Ahh, sheesh, these are supposed to be the easy ones,” Zane complained.

“Are you sure it’s all right for us to go in there?” Ralph said, shuffling his feet. “What’re the rules for hanging out in common rooms other than your own?”

“There aren’t any rules about it that I know of,” James said. “I just don’t think people do it much.” This didn’t seem to ease Ralph’s mind. He looked up and down the corridor fretfully.

“The hat... the hat...,” Zane mumbled, staring at his shoes. “Hat, hat, hat. Rabbit out of a hat. You pull things out of a hat. It’s probably like a metaphor or something. You wear a hat on your head... your brain’s in your head, under the hat. Ummm...”

He snapped his fingers and looked up at the eagle door knocker. “You can’t pull anything out of a hat that you haven’t already put in your head?”

“Crude, but close enough,” the door knocker replied. The door clicked and swung open.

“Wow!” James said, following Zane into the common room. “And your parents are Muggles?”

“Well, like I said, my dad makes movies, and my mom has E.S.P. about anything I try to sneak past her, so I assume I am unusually prepared for the magical world,” Zane said in an offhand manner. “So this is the Ravenclaw common room. Not an electric light or a Coke machine in sight. We do have a really cool statue, though, and a talking fireplace. Saw my dad in it last night. He’s adapting to all of this a little too well, if you ask me.”

Zane toured them through the Ravenclaw rooms, apparently making up details whenever he didn’t know them. Ralph and Zane tried to teach James how to play gin rummy with a deck of Muggle playing cards, but James couldn’t get interested in King, Queen and Jack cards that didn’t actually attack one another. When they got bored, Ralph took them to the Slytherin common room, leading them through a maze of dark, torch-lit cellar passages. They stopped at a large door that dominated the end of a corridor. Set in the middle of the door was a brass sculpture of a coiling snake, its wedge-shaped head protruding menacingly, open-mouthed.

“Oh, yeah,” Ralph muttered. He shook back his sleeve, revealing a new ring on his right hand. The ring was set with a large green emerald, shaped like an eye with a slit pupil. Ralph pressed it carefully into one of the snake’s eye sockets. The other socket glared to life, glowing green.

“Who sssseeks entry?” the snake’s head said in a thin, hissing voice.

“Me. Ralph Deedle. Slytherin, first year.”

The glowing green eye flicked over James and Zane. “And thesssse?”

“My friends. I, uh, I can vouch for them.”

The glowing eye studied Zane then James for an uncomfortably long time, and then finally winked out. A series of complicated ratchets, clicks, and clanks came from within the door. It swung ponderously open.

The Slytherin rooms occupied a large, gothic space carved from beneath the lake. Thick, stained-glass windows in the vaulted ceilings looked up through the depths of the lake, making the filtered sunlight flicker greenly on the glass portraits of Salazar Slytherin and his progeny. Even Ralph seemed jumpy as he showed them around. Only a few other students were in the common room, draped over the furnishings with extravagant indolence. They followed Zane and James with their eyes, smiling cryptically, but apparently without malice. Ralph stiffly mumbled greetings.

The Slytherin sleeping quarters felt to James like someplace a very tasteful and wealthy pirate captain might sleep. The room was wide, with a sunken floor and low ceilings hung with gargoyle head lanterns. The large beds were mahogany with great square pillars at each corner. The Slytherin House crest hung on curtains at the end of each bed. The three boys clambered onto Ralph’s immaculately made bed.

“These guys are pretty hardcore,” Ralph admitted in a low voice, indicating the owners of the other beds. “To tell you the truth, I feel a little out of place here. I like the Ravenclaw rooms better.”

“I don’t know,” Zane said, looking around the room admiringly. “They sure have a flair for decorating. Although it’d be hard to sleep with all those stuffed animal heads on the walls. Is that one a dragon?”

“Yes,” Ralph replied, his voice strained and terse. “These guys bring them from their houses. They have families that actually go out dragon hunting.”

James frowned. “I thought dragon hunting was illegal.”

“Yeah,” Ralph whispered severely. “That’s the thing, isn’t it? These guys’ families have hunting preserves where they can go shoot just about anything! That over there is the skull of a unicorn. Still has the horn on it, although they said it isn’t the real horn. The real horn is too valuable for magical uses to leave hanging on the wall. And that thing back behind Tom’s bed is a house-elf head! They put them on the wall when they knock ‘em off! And I swear it looks at me sometimes!” Ralph shuddered, and then seemed to decide he’d said too much. He pressed his mouth into a thin line and looked from James to Zane and back.

“Yeah, it is pretty creepy,” James admitted, deciding not to tell Ralph any of the things he’d heard about how some of the Slytherin families lived. “Still, I expect it’s mostly just for show.”

“What’s that?” Zane said suddenly, pouncing forward on the bed. “Is that a GameDeck? It is! And you’ve got the wireless uplink for online competition and everything!” He rummaged into a duffle bag at the

end of Ralph's bed, pulling out a small, black box about the size and shape of the deck of cards they'd been playing with earlier. It had a tiny screen set into the front, with a mind-boggling array of buttons beneath it. "What games do you have for it? Do you have *Armageddon Master Three*?"

"No!" Ralph rasped, grabbing the tiny machine away from Zane. "And don't let anybody else see this thing! They flip out about stuff like this."

Zane was incredulous. "What? Why?"

"How should I know? What's the deal with wizards and electronic stuff?" Ralph addressed the question to James, who frowned and shrugged.

"I don't know. Mostly, we just don't need it. Electronic stuff, like computers and phones, are just Muggle things. We do what we need to do with magic, I guess."

Ralph was shaking his head. "That's not how these guys act about it. They talked about it like I'd brought something nasty to school with me. Told me if I meant to be a real Slytherin, I needed to abandon all my false magic and machines."

"False magic?" Zane asked, glancing at James.

"Yeah," he sighed, "that's what some wizarding families think of Muggle electronics and machines. They say those things are just cheap knockoffs of what real wizards do. They think any wizards who use Muggle machines are traitors to their magical heritage or something."

"Yeah, that's pretty much what they told me," Ralph nodded. "They were, like, *passionate* about it! I hid my stuff right away. I figure I'll give it all to Dad at the next break."

Zane made a low whistle. "I'll bet your orthodox wizard types didn't like seeing my guys landing today in those hunks of rolling iron. You can't get much more machine-y than a Dodge Hornet."

James considered this. "Yeah, they might not like it very much, but there's a difference between electronics and clockwork. They think of cars as just a bunch of cogs and pistons. They aren't so much false magic as just unnecessarily complicated tools. It's the computers and stuff they really hate."

"I'll say," Ralph breathed, looking down at his GameDeck, and then stuffing it back into his duffle bag. He sighed. "Let's get out of here. Dinner's soon and I'm starved."

"Are you ever full, Ralph?" Zane asked as they jumped off the bed.

"I'm big-boned," Ralph said automatically, as if he'd said it many times before. "It's a glandular problem. Shut up."

"Just asking," Zane said, raising his hands. "Frankly, around here, I like the idea of having a friend who is the size of a dumpster."

At dinner, the three of them sat together at the Gryffindor table. James was a little worried about it until Ted appeared and slapped Zane on the back affectionately. “Our little Ravenclaw imp. How’s life in the second best house on campus?” After that, James noticed that Zane and Ralph weren’t the only students to sit down at other House tables.

After dinner, they discussed the following day’s schedules. Zane would be joining James for his Technomancy class with Professor Jackson, and Ralph would be with James in Defense Against the Dark Arts. The boys explored the library, hovering outside the Restricted Section for a while until the librarian shooed them away with a stern warning. Finally, they said their goodnights and went their different ways.

“See you tomorrow with Professor Stonewall!” Zane, who had a unique predisposition for nicknaming teachers, called as he climbed the staircase to the Ravenclaw common room.

Entering his own room, James found Ted seated on the couch with his arm slung casually around Petra. Sabrina and Damien were at a nearby table, arguing quietly over some papers spread on the table between them.

“Ready for school tomorrow, Junior?” Ted piped as James joined them.

“Yeah! I think so.”

“You’ll do fine,” Ted said reassuringly. “First year is mostly wand-practice and theory. Wait until you get to fourth year and Professor Trelawney.”

“At least we get to dilute Trelawney with that new bag of bones from the States,” Petra said.

James raised his eyebrows. “How do you mean?”

Ted answered, “Looks like they’ll be dividing the class. Last year it was Trelawney and Firenze, the centaur, but he’s gone this year, moved back with the valley centaurs in Greyhaven. So this year, it’s Trelawney and the voodoo queen, Madame Delacroix.”

“I imagine they’ll be best of friends,” Damien announced philosophically. “Like peas in a pod. Like powdered dragon eggshell and Mandrake sap.”

James blinked, but before he could ask Damien what he meant, Ted shook his head, smiling wickedly. “Use your imagination, mate.”

A few minutes later, James detached himself from the group and climbed up to the sleeping quarters. He felt a pleasant mix of nervousness and excitement about the next day. For a moment, he simply stood in the moonlit room, soaking up the thrill of being there, being a Gryffindor, and starting his studies. He had a momentary dizzying sense of the adventures and challenges he’d be facing in the coming years, and in that moment, he wished he could jump ahead and take them all on at once.

Noah appeared from the tiny washroom. He glanced at James before flinging himself onto his bed. “We all feel that way sometimes,” he said, as if he’d read James’ thoughts. “Wait until tomorrow evening and you’ll be back to normal. A good dose of lectures and homework does it to the best of us.” And he blew out the candle by his bed.





3. THE GHOST AND THE INTRUDER

James awoke early. The room was silent but for the breathing of his fellow Gryffindors and the whistling snore of Noah several beds away. The light in the room was only a few shades above night, a sort of pearly rose color. James tried to go back to sleep, but his mind was too full of all the unknowns that he was sure to experience in the next twelve hours. After a few minutes, he swung his feet out of bed and began to dress.

The halls of Hogwarts, while relatively quiet and empty, seemed busy in a completely different way this early in the morning. Dewy coolness and morning shadows filled the spaces, but there was a hint of busy commotion just out of sight behind unmarked doors down flights of narrow steps. As James moved among the corridors and passed empty classrooms that would later be filled with activity, he caught secondhand clues of the house-elf activity that thrived in the morning hours: a bucket and mop, still dripping, propped open a bathroom door; the scent of baking bread and the clatter of pots and pans drifted up a short flight of stairs; a row of windows stood with tapestries draped carefully out of them for airing.

James meandered to the Great Hall, but found it quiet and empty, the ceiling glowing a pale rose as the sky outside absorbed the light of the sunrise. James blinked and looked again. Something was moving among the semi-transparent rafters and beams. A grey shape flitted, humming a rather annoying little tune. James watched, trying to make out what it was. It seemed to be a small, fat man-shape with a gleefully impish expression of concentration. Against all probability, the figure seemed to be very carefully balancing tiny objects on the edges of some of the rafters. James noticed that the balanced objects were directly above the House tables, arranged at intervals and balanced so delicately as to fall at the slightest breeze.

“Fi!” the figure suddenly cried, making James jump. It had seen him. It swooped down upon him so swiftly that James almost dropped his books. “Who spies on the spy when he’s planning his morning funnies!?” the figure sang, annoyance and glee mingled in its voice.

“Oh,” James said, sighing. “I know you. Dad and Mum told me about you. Peeves.”

“And I know you, little crumpet!” Peeves announced merrily, looping around James. “Little Potter boy, James! Oooo! Sneaking about early-early, unlike your daddy! He preferred the night, he did! Seeking a spot of breakfast, is we? Oh, so sorry, all the little elfy-welfies are still cooking it up in the basements. Hogwarts belongs only to Peeves this early. Care for a Peruvian ballistic bean instead?”

Peeves shoved a wispy arm toward James’ face. The tiny objects filling Peeves’ hand looked like dried green kidney beans.

“No! Thanks! I’ll... I’ll be off, then.” James hooked a thumb over his shoulder and began to back away.

“Suresy, are we? Mmm! Beans, beans, the musical fruit!” Peeves dismissed James and swooped back up to the rafters again. “The more I plant, the more to toot! Tooty fruits in little Potter’s pumpkin juice, perhaps!” he cackled merrily.

James wandered until he was out of earshot of Peeves’ singing. After a few minutes, he found himself on a long, pillared balcony overlooking the school grounds. Mist arose from the lake in a great golden cloud, burning off in the sun. James leaned against a railing, soaking up the happiness and excitement of beginning his first day.

Something moved in the stillness. James glanced toward it. It had been at the edge of the forest, near Hagrid’s cabin. Perhaps Hagrid was back. James studied the cabin. There was still no smoke in the chimney. The yard looked untended and overgrown. James frowned slightly. Why wasn’t Hagrid back yet? He knew that the half-giant had a notorious soft spot for beasts and monsters, and he worried, along with his parents, that this would eventually be his undoing. Perhaps the alliance with the giants, tentative at the best of times, had fallen apart. Perhaps they had attacked Hagrid and Grawp or imprisoned them somehow. Perhaps--

The movement caught James' eye again. Just behind the stack of firewood by Hagrid's cabin, there was a flicker of color and a flash. James squinted, leaning as far over the balcony railing as he could. There it was again. A head peered over the firewood. In the distance, James could only see that it was a man about his dad's age. The face seemed to study the grounds, and then the man stood slowly and raised a camera. The flash came again as the man took a picture of the castle.

James was about to go find someone to tell about this strange sight, a teacher or even a house-elf, when something flew suddenly past him. James jumped aside, dropping his books for certain this time. The figure was white, semi-transparent, and utterly silent. It streamed past him and swooped down to the ground below, aiming for the interloper with the camera. The ghostly form was indistinct in the brightening sunlight, but the interloper saw it coming as if he had expected it. The man let out a little shriek of fear, but didn't run, despite the fact that at least part of him seemed to want to. Jerkily, he raised the camera again and snapped off a few quick shots of the ghostly form as it streaked towards him. Finally, just as the form was about to overtake him, the man spun on his heels and sprinted clumsily into the perimeter of the woods, disappearing into the darkness within. The ghost pulled up at the edge of the woods like a dog on the end of its leash. It peered in, then prowled back and forth restlessly. After a minute, it turned and began to return to the castle. As James watched, it began to take on a somewhat more solid shape. By the time the figure had returned to the ground in front of the balcony, it looked like a young man. The ghostly man walked with a determined, if rather dejected gait, head down. Then he glanced up, saw James, and stopped. There was a long moment of perfect stillness in which the man stared up at James, his transparent face expressionless. Then the figure simply evaporated, quickly and completely.

James stared at the place where the figure had been. He knew he hadn't imagined it. Ghosts were as much a part of Hogwarts as wands and moving paintings. He'd seen the Ravenclaw House ghost, the Grey Lady, only the day before, gliding down a corridor and looking quaintly morose. He was looking forward to meeting Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor House ghost. But this ghost was new to him. Of course, his parents couldn't have told him about every little detail of life at Hogwarts. A great deal of it was new to him. Still, the figure nagged at him, as did the sight of the man with the camera, sneaking about and taking pictures. Could he have been from one of the wizarding tabloids? Not *The Quibbler*, of course. James knew the people who ran that publication, and they wouldn't be interested in the snoozing morning life of Hogwarts. Still, there were plenty of muck-raking wizarding publications always interested in the supposed dirty little secrets of Hogwarts, the Ministry, and even James' dad.

Heading back toward the common room where he hoped to find Ted or one of the Gremlins before breakfast, James remembered that he hadn't yet given his parents' greetings to Professor Longbottom. He determined to do so at breakfast, and to use the opportunity to ask Neville about the ghost and the man with the camera.

In the Great Hall, however, Neville was nowhere to be seen. The long tables were now crowded with students in their school robes.

“So you saw some guy snapping pictures out on the grounds?” Ralph asked around a mouthful of French toast. “What’s the big deal about that?”

“I’m more interested in the ghost,” Zane said determinedly. “I wonder how he was killed. Do ghosts only come back when they’ve been killed in some really messy way?”

James shrugged. “I don’t know. Ask one of the older guys. For that matter, ask Nick when you see him next.”

“Nearly Headless Nick?” Sabrina said from further down the table.

“Yeah. Where’s he at? We have a question for him.”

“Gone,” Sabrina said, shaking her head so that the quill in her hair wobbled. “He hasn’t been with us since our first year. Finally made it into the Headless Hunt after all those years. We had a party for him, and then off he went. He never came back. Must have been the thing he needed to finally move on. Good for him, too. But still.”

“The Headless…” Ralph queried tentatively, as if he wasn’t sure he wanted clarification.

“He never came back?” James repeated. “But he was the Gryffindor House ghost! Who’s our ghost now?”

Sabrina shook her head again. “Don’t have one at the moment. Some of us thought it’d be old Dumbledore, but no luck.”

“But…” James said, but didn’t know how to continue. Every house had a ghost, right? He thought of the wispy shape that had turned into the silent young man on the front lawn.

“Mail call!” Zane called. Everyone looked up as owls began to swoop in through the high windows. The air was suddenly full of flapping wings and dropping letters and packages. James’ eyes widened as he recalled Peeves’ strange project from earlier that morning. Before he could say anything, the first loud pop rang out and a girl screamed in surprise and anger. She stood up from a nearby table, her robe spattered with yellow gobbets.

“My eggs blew up!” she exclaimed.

More pops erupted throughout the hall as the owls banked among the rafters. Zane and Ralph looked around wildly, trying to see what was going on.

“Time to go, mates!” James called, trying not to laugh. As he spoke, a Peruvian ballistic bean dropped from a rafter nearby, landing in a half empty cup and exploding with a loud pop. Juice erupted out of the cup like a tiny volcano. As James, Zane, and Ralph ran out of the milling chaos, Peeves swooped and dove through the Great Hall, laughing gleefully and singing about musical fruit.



Technomancy class was held in one of the smaller classrooms in the levels above the main hall. It had one window immediately behind the teacher's desk, and the morning sun shone directly through it, making Professor Jackson's head a corona of golden light. He bent over the desk, scratching away with a quill and parchment as Zane and James arrived. They found seats in the uncomfortable hush of the room, taking care not to break the silence by scraping their chairs. Slowly, the room filled, few students daring to speak, so that no noise could be heard except the busy scritch of the professor's quill. Finally, he consulted the clock on his desk and stood up, smoothing the front of his dark grey tunic.

"Welcome, students. My name, as you may know, is Theodore Jackson. I will be instructing you this year in the study of technomancy. I believe a great deal in reading, and I put a great stock in listening. You will do much of both in my class." His voice was calm and measured, more refined than James had expected. His iron grey hair was combed with military neatness. His bushy black eyebrows made a line as straight as a ruler across his forehead.

"It has been said," Jackson continued, beginning to pace slowly around the room, "that there is no such thing as a stupid question. No doubt you yourselves have been told this. Questions, it is supposed, are the sign of an inquisitive mind." He stopped, surveying them critically. "On the contrary, questions are merely the sign of a student who has not been paying attention."

Zane nudged James with his elbow. James glanced at him, then at his parchment. Zane had already drawn a simple but remarkably accurate caricature of the professor. James stifled a laugh, as much at Zane's audacity as at the drawing.

Jackson continued. "Pay attention in class. Take notes. Read the assigned texts. If you can accomplish these things, you will find very little need for questions. Mind you, I am not forbidding questions. I am merely warning you to consider whether any question would require my repeating myself. If it does not, I will commend you. If it does, I will..." he paused, allowing his gaze to roam over the room, "*remind* you of this conversation."

Jackson had completed his circuit of the room. He turned to the chalkboard next to the window. Taking his wand out of a sheath in his sleeve, he flicked it at the board. "Who, pray, might be able to tell me

what the study of technomancy entails?” On the chalkboard, the word spelled out in neat, slanting cursive. There was a long, uncomfortable pause. Finally, a girl raised her hand tentatively.

Jackson gestured at her. “Call it out, Miss, er... forgive me, I will learn all your names in time. Gallows, is it?”

“Sir,” the girl said in a small voice, apparently thinking of Franklyn’s advice from the day before. “Technomancy is, I believe, the study of the science of magic?”

“You are of the Ravenclaw House, Miss Gallows?” Jackson asked, eyeing her. She nodded. “Five points for Ravenclaw, then, although I don’t approve of the word ‘believe’ in my class. Belief and knowledge have little, if anything, in common. In this class, we will apply ourselves to knowledge. Science. Facts. If you want belief, Mistress Delacroix’s class will be convening down the hall in the next hour.” He pointed, and for the first time there was the surfacing of something like humor in the stony façade. A few students dared to smile and laugh quietly. Jackson turned, flicking his wand at the chalkboard again.

“The study of the science of magic, yes. It is a common and sad misunderstanding that magic is a mystical or unnatural pursuit. Those that believe--and here I use the term ‘believe’ intentionally--those that believe magic is simply mystical are also prone to believe in such things as destiny, luck, and the American Quidditch team. In short, lost causes with no shred of empirical evidence to support them.” More smiles appeared in the room. Obviously, there was more to Professor Jackson than met the eye.

“Magic,” he continued, as the chalkboard began to scribble his notes, “does not, I repeat, *does not* break any of the natural laws of science. Magic *exploits* those laws using very specific and creative methods. Mr. Walker.”

Zane jumped in his seat, looking up from the drawing he’d been working at while the others scribbled notes. Jackson was still facing the chalkboard, his back to Zane.

“I need a volunteer, Mr. Walker. Might I borrow your parchment?” It wasn’t a request. As he spoke, he flicked his wand and Zane’s parchment swooped up and wove toward the front of the room. Jackson caught it deftly with a raised hand. He turned slowly, holding the parchment up, not looking at it. The class looked with marked silence at the rather good caricature of Jackson Zane had drawn. Zane began to sink slowly in his seat, as if he was trying to melt under the desk.

“Is it simply magic that makes a true wizard’s drawing take on life?” Jackson asked. As he spoke, the drawing on the parchment moved. The expression changed from a caricature of steely-eyed sternness to one of cartoonish anger. The perspective pulled back, and now there was a desk in front of the Jackson drawing. A tiny cartoon version of Zane cowered at the desk. The Jackson drawing pulled out a gigantic cartoon clipboard and began to make red slashes on the clipboard, which had the letters O.W.L. across the top. The cartoon Zane fell on his knees, pleading silently with the Jackson caricature, which shook its head imperiously. The cartoon Zane cried, his mouth a giant boomerang of woe, comic tears springing from his head.

Jackson turned his head and finally looked at the parchment in his hand as the class erupted into gales of laughter. He smiled a small but genuine smile. “Unfortunately, Mr. Walker, your subtracted five points cancel out Miss Gallows’ awarded five points. Ho hum. Such is life.”

He began to pace around the room again, placing the drawing carefully back onto Zane’s desk as he passed. “No, magic is not, as it were, simply a magic word. In reality, the true wizard learns to imprint his own personality on the paper using a means *other* than the quill. Nothing unnatural occurs. There is simply a different medium of expression taking place. Magic exploits the natural laws, but it does not break them. In other words, magic is not unnatural, but it is *supernatural*. That is, it is *beyond* the natural, but not outside it. Another example. Mr. um...”

Jackson pointed at a boy near him, who leaned suddenly back in his chair, looking rather cross-eyed at the pointing finger. “Murdock, sir,” the boy said.

“Murdock. You are of age for Apparition, I am correct?”

“Oh. Yes, sir,” Murdock said, seeming relieved.

“Describe Apparition for us, will you?”

Murdock looked perplexed. “S’pretty basic, isn’t it? I mean, it’s just a matter of getting a place nice and solid in your mind, closing your eyes, and, well, making it happen. Then bang, you’re there.”

“Bang? You say?” Jackson said, his face blank.

Murdock reddened. “Well, yeah, more or less. You just zap there. Just like that.”

“So it is instantaneous, you’d say.”

“Yeah. I guess I’d say that.”

Jackson raised an eyebrow. “You guess?”

Murdock squirmed, glancing at those seated near him for help. “Er. No. I mean, yes. Definitely. Instantaneously. Like you said.”

“Like *you* said, Mr. Murdock,” Jackson corrected mildly. He was moving again, proceeding back toward the front of the room. He touched another student on the shoulder as he went. “Miss?”

“Sabrina Hildegard, sir,” Sabrina said as clearly and politely as she could.

“Would you be so kind as to perform a small favor for us, Miss Hildegard? We require the use of two ten-second timers from Professor Slughorn’s Potions room. Second door on the left, I believe. Thank you.”

Sabrina hurried out as Jackson faced the classroom again. “Mr. Murdock, have you any idea what it is, precisely, that happens when you Disapparate?”

Murdock had apparently determined that abject ignorance was his safest tack. He shook his head firmly.

Jackson seemed to approve. “Let us examine it this way. Who can tell me where vanished objects go?”

This time Petra Morganstern raised her hand. “Sir. Vanished objects go nowhere, which is to say, they go everywhere.”

Jackson nodded. “A textbook answer, Miss. But an empty one. Matter cannot be in two places at once, nor can it be both everywhere and nowhere. I’ll save our time by not taxing this class’s ignorance on the subject any longer. This is the part where you listen and I speak.”

Around the room, quills were dipped and made ready. Jackson began to pace again. “Matter, as even you all know, is made up almost entirely of nothing. Atoms collect in space, forming a shape that, from our vantage point, seems solid. This candlestick,” Jackson laid his hand on a brass candlestick on his desk, “seems to us to be a single, very solid item, but is, in fact, trillions of tiny motes hovering with just enough proximity to one another as to imply shape and weight to our clumsy perspective. When we vanish it,” Jackson flicked his wand casually at the candlestick and it disappeared with a barely audible pop, “we are not moving the candlestick, or destroying it, or causing the matter that comprised it to cease being. Are we?”

Jackson’s piercing eyes roamed over the room, leaping from face to face as the students stopped writing, waiting for him to go on.

“No. Instead, we have altered the arrangement of the spaces between those atoms,” he said meaningfully. “We have expanded the distance from point to point, perhaps a thousandfold, perhaps a millionfold. The multiplication of those spaces expands the candlestick to a point of nearly planetary dimensions. The result is that we can actually walk through it, through the spaces between its atoms, and never even notice. In short, the candlestick is still here. It has simply been expanded so greatly, thinned to such an ephemeral level as to become physically insubstantial. It is, in effect, everywhere, and nowhere.”

Sabrina returned with the timers, placing them onto Jackson’s desk. “Ah, thank you, Miss Hildegard. Murdock.”

Murdock jumped again. There was a titter from the class. “Sir?”

“Fear not, my brave friend. I would like you to perform what I suspect you will find to be a very simple task. I’d like you to Disapparate for us.”

Murdock looked shocked. “Disapparate? But... but nobody can Disapparate on the school grounds, sir.”

“True enough. A quaint and merely symbolic restriction, but a restriction nonetheless. Fortunately for us, I have arranged a temporary educational allowance that will allow you, Mr. Murdock, to Disapparate from over there,” Jackson paced to the front corner of the room and pointed at the floor, “to here.”

Murdock stood and swayed slightly as he worked out what the professor was asking. “You want me to Disapparate from this room... to this room?”

“From over there, where you are, to here. This corner, if you could. I wouldn’t expect it to be much of a challenge. Except, I’d like you to do it carrying this.” Jackson picked up one of the small hourglasses Sabrina had brought. “Turn it over at precisely the moment before you Disapparate. Understood?”

Murdock nodded in relief. “No problem, sir. I can do that blindfolded.”

“I shouldn’t think that’d be necessary,” Jackson said, handing Murdock the timer. He returned to the front of the room, picking up the second timer himself.

“On three, Mr. Murdock. One... two... three!”

Both Murdock and Jackson turned their timers over. A split second later, Murdock vanished with a loud *crack*. Every eye in the room snapped towards the front corner.

Jackson held the timer, watching the sand flow silently through the pinched glass. He hummed a bit. He allowed himself to lean slightly on his desk. Then, lazily, he turned and looked into the front corner of the classroom.

There was a second *crack* as Murdock Reapparated. In one remarkably swift motion, Jackson took Murdock’s hourglass from his hand and laid both his and Murdock’s on their sides in the middle of his desk. He stood back, looking severely at both hourglasses. The sand in Jackson’s hourglass was divided almost evenly between the two bulbs. Murdock’s hourglass still had nearly all of its sand in the top.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Murdock,” Jackson said, not taking his eyes off the hourglasses, “that your hypothesis has proven faulty. Do return to your seat, and thank you.”

Jackson looked up at the class and gestured at the hourglasses. “A difference of four seconds, give or take a few tenths. It appears that Apparition is not, in fact, instantaneous. But--and this is the very interesting part--it *is* instantaneous for the Apparator. What can technomancy tell us about this? That is a rhetorical question. I will answer.”

Jackson resumed his pacing around the room as words began to scribble onto the chalkboard again. Around the room, students bent over their parchments. “Apparition utilizes exactly the same methodology as vanished objects. The Apparator magnifies the distance between his or her own atoms, expanding themselves to such a degree that they become physically insubstantial, unseen, immeasurable, effectively, everywhere. Having achieved everywhere, the Apparator then automatically *reduces* the distance between his or her atoms, but with a new center point, determined by their mental landmarking immediately before

Disapparition. The wizard standing in London envisions Ebbets Field, Disapparates--that is, achieves everywhere--and then Reapparates with a new solidity point at Ebbets Field. It is essential that the wizard make that predestination in his mind before Disapparition. Can anyone tell me, using technomancy, why?"

Silence. Then the girl named Gallows raised her hand again. "Because the process of Apparition is instantaneous for the wizard?"

"Partial credit, Miss," Jackson said, almost kindly. "Depending on distances, Apparition takes time, as we have just seen, and time is not, relatively speaking, flexible. No, the reason that the wizard must firmly fix his destination before he Disapparates is that, while the wizard is in the state of everywhere, his mind is in a state of perfect hibernation. The time it takes to Apparate is not instantaneous, but because the wizard's mind is effectively frozen during the process, it seems to be instantaneous to him. Since a wizard cannot think or feel during the process of Apparition, a wizard who fails to fix his solidity destination before Disapparating... will never Reapparate at all."

Jackson frowned and scanned the class, looking for some sign that they'd grasped the lesson. After several seconds, a hand slowly raised. It was Murdock. His face was a pall of misery as he apparently struggled to arrange these radical concepts in his mind. Jackson's bushy black eyebrows rose slowly.

"Yes, Mr. Murdock?"

"Question sir. I'm sorry. Where--" he coughed, cleared his throat, and then licked his lips. "Where is Ebbets Field?"



James met Zane and Ralph after lunch, all three having a short free period. With too much time to head directly to their next classes, but not enough time to go to their common rooms, they strolled aimlessly along the crowded halls near the courtyard, trying to stay out of the way of the older students and discussing their morning's classes.

"I'm telling you, old Stonewall has some wacky magical effect on the passage of time!" Zane told Ralph passionately. "I swear, at one point, I saw the clock actually move backwards."

“Well, I liked my teacher. Professor Flitwick. You’ve seen him around,” Ralph said, amiably changing the subject.

Zane was undeterred. “Guy’s got eyes in the back of his wig or something. Who’d’ve thought a school of witchcraft would be so sneaky?”

“Professor Flitwick teaches beginning spells and wandwork, doesn’t he?” James asked Ralph.

“Yeah. It was really excellent. I mean, it’s one thing to read about doing magic, but seeing it happen is something else. He made his chair float, books and all!”

“Books?” Zane interjected.

“Yeah, you know that stack of books he keeps on his chair so he can see over the desk? Must be a hundred pounds of them. He floated the chair right off the floor with them still on it, just using his wand.”

“How’d you do at it?” Zane asked. James cringed, thinking of Ralph’s ridiculous wand.

“Not bad, actually,” Ralph said mildly. There was a pause as Zane and James stopped to look at him.

“Really. Not bad,” Ralph repeated. “I mean, we weren’t lifting chairs or anything. Just feathers. Flitwick said he didn’t expect us to get it the first time. But still, I did as well as anybody else.” Ralph looked thoughtful. “Maybe even a little better. Flitwick seemed pretty happy with it. He said I was a natural.”

“You made a feather float with that crazy snowman-whisker log?” Zane asked incredulously.

Ralph looked annoyed. “Yes. For your information, Flitwick says that the wand is just a tool. It’s the wizard that makes the magic. Maybe I’m just talented. Did that occur to you, Mr. Wand-Expert-All-of-a-Sudden?”

“Sheesh, sorry,” Zane mumbled. “Just don’t point that crazy snowman log at me. I wanna keep the same number of arms and legs.”

“Forget it,” James soothed as they started walking again. “Flitwick’s right. Who cares where your wand came from? You really got the feather to levitate?”

Ralph allowed a small grin of pride. “All the way to the ceiling. It’s still up there now! I got it stuck in a rafter.”

“Nice,” James nodded appreciatively.

An older boy in a green tie bumped James, knocking him off the path and into the grass of the courtyard. He bumped into Ralph as well, but Ralph was as tall as the older boy, and rather wider. The boy bounced off Ralph, who didn’t budge.

“Sorry,” Ralph muttered as the boy stopped and glared at him.

“Watch where you’re going, first years,” the boy said coldly, glancing from James to Ralph. “And maybe you ought to be more careful who you allow yourself to be seen with, Deedle.” He stepped around Ralph without waiting for a response.

“Now, *that’s* the Slytherin spirit you told me about on the train,” Zane said. “So much for ‘I expect we’ll all be friends.’”

“That was Trent,” Ralph said morosely, watching the boy walk away. “He’s the one who told me my GameDeck was an insult to my wizarding blood. Didn’t take him long to borrow it, though.”

James barely heard. He was distracted by something the boy had been wearing. “What’d his badge say?”

“Oh, they’ve all started wearing those,” Ralph said. “Tabitha Corsica was handing them out in the common room this morning. Here.” Ralph reached into his robes and produced a similar badge. “I forgot to put mine on.”

James looked at the badge. White letters on a dark blue background read ‘Progressive Wizarding Against False History’. A large red ‘X’ repeatedly slashed itself across the words ‘False History’, and then faded out.

“They don’t all say that,” Ralph said, taking the badge back. “Some of them say ‘Question the Victors’. Others have longer sayings on them that didn’t make any sense to me. What’s an Auror?”

Zane piped up. “My dad got called for ‘Auror duty’ once. He got out of it because he was on a shoot in New Zealand. He says if ‘Aurors’ got paid more, we’d get better verdicts.”

Ralph looked bewildered at Zane. James sighed. “Aurors,” he said slowly and carefully, “are witches and wizards who find and catch dark witches and wizards. They’re sort of like wizarding police, I guess. My dad’s an Auror.”

“Head of the Auror Department, you mean,” a voice said as a group passed. Tabitha Corsica was at the head of the group, looking back at James as she swept on. “But do pardon my interruption.” The others in the group looked back at James with unreadable smiles. All of them were wearing the blue badges.

“Yeah,” James said, loudly but rather uncertainly, “he is.”

“Your dad’s chief of the wizard cops?” Zane asked, glancing from the departing Slytherins to James. James grimaced and nodded. He’d had a chance to read another of the badges. It read ‘Say No to Auror Fear Mongering; Say Yes to Freedom of Magical Expression’. James didn’t know what any of it meant, but he had a bad feeling about it.

Zane suddenly turned and nudged Ralph with his elbow. “Better get that badge on, mate, or your house buddies will think you’ve gone all soft on False History and the Auror Imperialists or whatever.”

James blinked, finally registering something Ralph had said a minute ago. “Did you say that your roommate borrowed your GameDeck thing?”

Ralph smiled humorlessly. “Well, maybe not him. Somebody did. Not that many people knew about it, though. Unless they talked it up behind my back. All I know is it went missing from my bag right after I showed it to you guys. I suppose my housemates were just purging the room of counterfeit magic.” He sighed.

James couldn’t shake the nasty feeling that was cooling in his belly. It was all wrapped up in the sugary niceness of some of the Slytherins, and the odd badges. And now, one of them had taken Ralph’s weird Muggle game device. Why?

They were passing the Hogwarts trophy case when Zane, who had drifted ahead, called out. “Hey, club sign-up sheets. Let’s do something extracurricular.” He leaned in, examining one sheet in particular. “‘Read the Runes! Predict your Fate and the Fates of your Friends! Learn the Language of the Stars.’ Blah, blah. ‘Constellations Club. Meets at eleven o’clock on Tuesdays in the West Tower.’ Sounds to me like an excuse to be out late. I’m there.” He grabbed the quill which had been affixed to a shelf by a length of string, dipped it theatrically, and scribbled his name on the sheet.

James and Ralph had caught up with him. Ralph leaned in, reading the sign-up sheets aloud. “Debate teams, Wizard Chess Club, House Quidditch teams.”

“What? Where?” Zane said, still holding the quill as if he meant to stab something with it. He found the parchment for the Ravenclaw Quidditch Team tryouts and began to sign his name. “I just gotta get on one of those brooms. What do you think my chances are, James?”

James took the quill from Zane, shaking his head in amusement. “Anything’s possible. My dad was the Seeker for the Gryffindor team his first year. Youngest Seeker in team history. He’s part of the reason they changed the rules. Used to be that first years couldn’t be on the team. Now it’s allowed, but really, really rare.” James signed his name to the bottom of the sheet for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Tryouts, he saw, were after classes the next day.

“Ralph, you going to sign up for the Slytherins? Come on! All your friends are doing it!” Zane leered at the bigger boy.

“Nah, I was never very good at sports.”

“You?” Zane cried heartily, throwing an arm rather awkwardly over Ralph’s shoulder. “You’re a brick wall! All you have to do is park yourself in front of the goal and the defense is all shored up! All they’d need is to find a broom that’ll hold you, you big lug.”

“Shut up!” Ralph said, twisting away from Zane’s arm, but smiling and turning red. “Actually I was thinking about signing up for the debate team. Tabitha thinks I’d be good on it.”

James blinked. “Tabitha Corsica asked you to be on the Slytherin debate team?”

“Actually,” Zane said, peering at the debate sign-up sheets, “debate teams aren’t divided by house. They’re just random Teams A and B. Look, people from all different houses are on each team. There’s even some of the visiting Alma Alerons on here.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and sign up, Ralph?” James asked. Ralph obviously wanted to.

“I don’t know. I might.”

“Oh, look, Petra’s on Team A,” Zane said. He began to sign his name again.

James frowned. “You’re joining the debate team just because Petra Morganstern is on it?”

“Can you think of a better reason?”

“You know,” James said, laughing, “Petra is going out with Ted, I think.”

“My dad says girls don’t know whether they like ice cream until they’ve tried every kind,” Zane said wisely, sticking the quill back into its holder.

Ralph furrowed his brow. “What’s that mean?”

“It means Zane here thinks he can give Ted a run for his money in the romance department,” James said. He both admired and worried about Zane’s lack of inhibition.

“It means,” Zane replied, “that Petra doesn’t know what she wants in a man until she’s had a chance to get to know as many men as possible. I’m thinking only of her best interests.”

Ralph studied Zane for a moment. “You do know you’re eleven years old, right?”

James stopped as Zane and Ralph began to walk on. His eye had been caught by a picture in the trophy case. He leaned in, cupping his hands around his face to block the glare of the sun. The picture was black and white, moving, as all wizard pictures did. It was his dad, younger, thinner, his black hair wild and unruly over the famous, characteristic scar. He was smiling uncomfortably at the camera, his eyes moving as if he were avoiding eye contact with somebody or something outside the camera’s view. Next to the framed photo was a large trophy made of silver and a sort of blue crystal that glowed with a shifting, curling light. James read the plaque below the trophy.

The Triwizard Cup

Jointly Awarded to Harry Potter and Cedric Diggory,

Hogwarts students of the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff Houses, respectively,

for winning the Triwizard Tournament, which was held upon these grounds
with the cooperation of representatives from the
Durmstrang Institute and the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic.

There was more, but James didn't read it. He knew the story. Harry Potter's name had been drawn as a competitor fraudulently, having been placed into the running by a dark wizard named Crouch. It had led to both Harry and Diggory being sent via Portkey to Voldemort's lair, resulting in the evil wizard's bodily return. No wonder his dad looked so uncomfortable in the photo. He had been under the legal age for the tournament, and had been the superfluous fourth contestant in a three wizard competition. He'd been in a room full of people who suspected him of cheating and dark magic, at best.

James glanced at the photo on the other side of the cup, the one of Diggory. His smile looked genuine and hearty compared to his dad's. James had never seen a photo of Diggory before, but it looked familiar nonetheless. He knew the story of Diggory, knew he had died next to his dad in the graveyard they'd been sent to, killed at the command of Voldemort. His dad rarely talked about that night, and James understood why, or at least thought he did.

He sighed, and then ran to catch up with Zane and Ralph.

Later that day, when James stopped in his room to swap books for his Defense Against the Dark Arts class, he found Nobby waiting for him, scratching the windowsill impatiently. James grabbed the rolled parchment off Nobby's leg and read it.

Dear James,

Your father and I are thrilled to hear you are settling in well, as we knew you would. Your Uncle Ron says congratulations on becoming a Gryffindor, and we all concur. Can't wait to hear how your first day's classes go. Also, I hope you hear about this from us first: your father has been asked to go to Hogwarts for a meeting with the American wizards about international security and other matters of 'mutual interest'. I'll be staying home with Albus and Lil, but your father looks forward to seeing you next week. Make sure you are eating more than pastries and meat pies and be sure to get your robes and yourself washed at least once a week. (That was a joke. Actually, no, it wasn't.)

Love and kisses,

Mum

James folded the note into the book he was carrying as he ran down the steps. The knowledge that he'd be seeing his dad next week had left him with mixed feelings. Of course, he was excited to see him and to introduce him to his new friends. Still, he feared that the visit would also make the shadow of his famous father that much harder to escape. He was fleetingly thankful that Zane and Ralph were both Muggle-born, and therefore, relatively ignorant of the exploits of his legendary dad.

As he joined the crowd of students filing into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, James saw another of the badges on a Slytherin's robe. 'Progressive Wizards Against Magical Discrimination', it read. He felt a sort of aimless, sinking feeling, and then he noticed the newspaper clipping tacked to the wall near the door. 'Harry Potter to Join International Wizarding Summit', ran the headline. Below it, smaller type read 'Head Auror to Meet United States Representatives During Hogwarts Ceremony. Security Questions Prevail.' Pinned to the newspaper clipping so that it obscured the photo of a smiling adult Harry Potter was another of the blue badges. 'Question the Victors', it flashed.

"Come on," Ralph urged, joining James. "We'll be late."

As they navigated the crowded room and found two seats near the front, Ralph leaned toward James. "Was that your dad on that newspaper story?"

James had assumed Ralph hadn't noticed it. He glanced at Ralph as they sat down. "Yeah. Mum just wrote me about it. He'll be here beginning of next week. Big meeting with the Americans, I guess."

Ralph said nothing, but looked uncomfortable.

"You already knew about it, didn't you?" James whispered as the class quieted down.

"No," Ralph muttered, "at least, not specifically. My housemates have been talking about some sort of protest all day, though. Looks like it's about your dad, I guess."

James stared at Ralph, his mouth open slightly. So that's what Tabitha Corsica and her Slytherins were up to, behind all the friendly smiles and speeches. The Slytherin tactics had changed, but not their purpose. James pressed his lips into a grim line and turned to the front of the room as Professor Franklyn approached the main desk. Professor Jackson was walking next to him, carrying his black leather case and talking in a low tone.

"Greetings, students," Franklyn said crisply. "I suspect many of you have already met Professor Jackson. Please forgive the short delay." Jackson eyed the seated students from over his shoulder, his face like granite. Zane's nickname for the man did seem to be rather appropriate, James thought. Franklyn turned back to Jackson and spoke in a hushed voice. Jackson seemed discontent with what Franklyn was saying. He set his case down on the floor next to him, freeing his hand to gesture minutely.

James looked down at the case. It was only a foot or two from where he sat in the front row. Jackson was never seen without the case, which was unremarkable in nearly every way apart from the fact that he guarded it so closely. James tried not to listen in on the conversation between the two professors, which was

obviously meant to be secret. Of course, that made it all the more intriguing. He heard the words ‘grotto’ and ‘Merlin’. Then a third voice pierced the room.

“Professor Jackson,” the voice said, and while it wasn’t a loud voice, it rang with an air of understated power. James turned around to see who was speaking. Madame Delacroix was standing just inside the doorway to the room, her blind gaze hovering somewhere over everyone’s heads. “I thought you might like to know dat your class is awaiting you. You are always such a...,” she seemed to search the air for the right word, “*stickler* for punctuality.” Her voice had a slow drawl that was somehow both French and Southern American. She smiled vaguely, then turned, her cane clicking the floor, and disappeared down the hall.

Jackson’s face was even harder than normal as he stared at the now empty doorway. He glanced pointedly at Franklyn, and then dropped his gaze, reaching for his case. He froze in mid-reach, and James couldn’t help glancing down toward the professor’s feet. The black leather case had apparently come slightly open when he’d set it down. Its brass catches glinted. No one else seemed to have noticed except for James and Professor Jackson. Jackson resumed reaching for his case, slowly, clicking it closed with one large, knobby-knuckled hand. James had only a narrow glimpse into the case. It appeared to be stuffed with folds of some rich, dark cloth. Jackson straightened, picking the case back up, and as he did so, he glanced at James, his stony face grim. James tried to glance away, but it was too late. Jackson knew he’d seen, even if he didn’t know what it was.

Without a word, Jackson strode back up the aisle, moving with that purposeful, sweeping gait that looked so much like an old battleship under full sail, and then turned into the hall without looking back.

“Thank you for your patience,” Franklyn said to the class, adjusting his glasses. “Welcome to Defense Against the Dark Arts. By now, most of you know my name, and many of you, I assume, know something of my history. Just to get some of the obvious questions out of the way: Yes, I am *that* Benjamin Franklin. No, I didn’t actually invent electricity for the Muggles, but I did give them a small push in the right direction. Yes, I was a part of the American Continental Congress, although for obvious reasons, I was not one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. At that time, I used two different spellings of my name, only one of which was known to the Muggle world, which made it easier for me to know which correspondences to open first. Yes, I realize my face graces the American one hundred dollar bill. No, contrary to popular myth, I do not carry sheets of uncut hundreds around to snip out and sign for admirers. Yes, I am indeed quite old, and yes, this is accomplished through means of magic, although I assure you that those means are a lot more mundane and prosaic than many have assumed. Emphatically no, I am not immortal. I am a very, very old man who has aged rather well with a little help. Does that cover most of the obvious questions?” Franklyn finished with a wry smile, surveying the remarkably full classroom. There was a murmur of assent.

“Excellent. Onward and upward then. And please,” Franklyn continued, opening a very large book on his desk, “let us avoid any ‘it’s all about the Benjamins’ jokes. They weren’t funny two hundred years ago and they are even less funny now, thank you.”



Crossing the grounds on their way to dinner in the Great Hall, James and Ralph were passing Hagrid's cabin when they noticed the ribbon of smoke coming out of the chimney. James broke into a grin, called Ralph to follow, and ran up to the front door.

"James!" Hagrid bellowed, opening the door. He threw his arms around the boy, completely engulfing him. Ralph's eyes widened and he took a step backwards, looking Hagrid up and down. "So good to have a Potter back in school. How's yer mum an' dad, an' li'l Albus an' Lily?"

"Everybody's fine, Hagrid. Where've you been?"

Hagrid stepped out, closing the door behind him. They followed him as he crossed the grounds toward the castle. "Up the mountains meetin' with the giants, that's where. Grawp and me, we go every year, don't we? Spreadin' goodwill an' tryin' to keep 'em all honest, for whatever it's worth. Stayed a li'l longer this year on account o' li'l Grawpy findin' himself a girlfriend. Who's yer mate here, James?"

James, momentarily distracted by the thought of Hagrid's half-brother, who was a full giant, performing mating rituals with a mountain giantess, had completely forgotten about Ralph. "Oh! This is my friend, Ralph Deedle. He's a first year, like me. Hagrid, are you telling us Grawp's in love?"

Hagrid grew vaguely misty. "Aww, it's sweet to see the li'l fella and his lady friend together. Why, they're both just as happy as a pair of hippogriffs in a henhouse. Giant courtships are very delicate things, yeh know."

Ralph was having some difficulty keeping up with the conversation. "Grawp, your brother, is a giant?"

"Well, sure," Hagrid boomed happily. "He's only a li'l one. Sixteen feet or so. Yeh should see his lady friend. She's from the Crest-Dweller's tribe, twenty-two feet if she's an inch. Not my type of girl, o' course, but Grawpy's just smitten by her. Not surprising, really, since the first step in any giant courtship is smitin' the mate over the head with a big hunk of tree trunk. She laid the li'l fella right out cold for the best part of a day. After that, he's been as google-eyed as a pup."

James was afraid to ask, and suspected he knew the answer. “Did Grawp bring his girlfriend back home with him?”

Hagrid looked taken aback. “Well, sure he did. This is his home, now, isn’t it? He’ll make a good wife of her, once they’re done a-courtin’. She’s made herself a nice little hovel up in the hills behind the forest. Grawp’s there now, helpin’ her settle in, I expect.”

James tried to imagine Grawp helping a twenty-two-foot giantess ‘settle in’, but his exhausted imagination shut down. He shook his head, attempting to clear it.

“I hear your dad’s comin’ in for a meetin’ next week, James,” Hagrid said as they entered the shadow of the main gates. “Havin’ a meetin’ of the minds with the muckety-mucks from across the pond, eh?”

James puzzled over Hagrid’s terminology. “If you say so.”

“Ahh, it’ll be nice to have yer dad over for tea again, just like old times. Only without all the secrecy and adventure. Did I tell yeh about the time yer dad and Ron and Hermione helped my Norbert escape?”

“Only about a hundred times, Hagrid,” James laughed, pulling open the door of the Great Hall. “But don’t worry, it changes a little every time I hear it.”

Later, when dinner was almost over, James approached Hagrid where he thought they could have a more private conversation. “Hagrid, can I ask you a, sort of, official question?”

“O’ course yeh can. I can’t guarantee I’ll know the answer, but I’ll do my best.”

James glanced around and saw Ralph sitting at the Slytherin table on the edge of Tabitha Corsica’s group. She was talking seriously, her pretty face lit in the candlelight and the deepening light of the dusky ceiling. “Do people ever get, I don’t know, sorted wrong? Is it possible that the Hat could make a mistake and put somebody in the wrong house?”

Hagrid sat down heavily on a nearby bench, making it groan appreciably. “Well, I can’t say as I’ve ever heard of it happ’nin’ before,” he said. “Some people may not like where they’re placed, but that doesn’t mean it’s not a good fit. It might mean they just aren’t happy with who they really are. What is it yer worried about, James?”

“Oh, it’s not me I’m thinking of,” James said hurriedly, taking his eyes off Ralph so as not to implicate him. “It’s just a, sort of, you know, general question. I was just wondering.”

Hagrid smiled crookedly and clapped James on the back, making him stumble half a step. “Just like your dad, yeh are. Always lookin’ out for other people when yeh ought to be watchin’ your own step. It’ll get yeh in hot water if yeh aren’t careful, just like it did him!” He chuckled, making a sound like loose rocks in a fast river. The thought seemed to bring Hagrid a great deal of hearty pleasure. “Nah, the Sorting Hat knows what it’s up to, I expect. Everything’ll come out all right. Yeh wait and see.”

But as James walked back to his table, making eye contact with Ralph for a moment as he passed the Slytherins, he wondered.



4. THE PROGRESSIVE ELEMENT

James Potter sat up in his bed, stifling a gasp. He listened very intently, peering around the darkened sleeping chamber. All around him were the small sounds of sleeping Gryffindors. Ted rolled over and snorted, muttering in his sleep. James held his breath. He'd awakened a few minutes earlier with the sound of his own name in his ears. It had been like a voice in a dream: distant and whispered, as if blown on smoke down a long, dark tunnel. He had just about convinced himself that it had, in fact, been the tail of a dream and drifted back to sleep when he'd heard it again. It seemed to come out of the walls themselves, a faraway sound, still somehow right next to him, like a chorus of whispers saying his full name.

Very quietly, James slipped out of bed and shrugged into his bathrobe. The stone floor was cool under his feet as he stood and listened, tilting his head. He turned slowly, and as he looked toward the door, the figure there moved. He hadn't seen it appear, it was simply there, floating, where a moment before there had been darkness. James startled and backed into his bed, almost falling backwards onto it. Then he recognized the ghostly shape. It was the same wispy, white figure he'd seen chase the interloper off the school grounds, the ghostly shape that had come to look like a young man as it came back to the castle. In the

darkness of the doorway, the figure seemed much brighter than it had appeared in the morning sunlight. It was wispy and shifting, with only the barest suggestion of its human shape. It spoke again without moving.

James Potter.

Then it turned and flitted down the stairs.

James hesitated for only a second, then wrapped his bathrobe more tightly about him and followed the figure, his bare feet slapping lightly on the stone steps.

He reached the deserted common room just in time to see the ghostly shape glide through the portrait hole, passing through the back of the portrait of the Fat Lady. James hurried to follow.

James expected the Fat Lady to scold him as he snuck past her, but she was deeply asleep in her frame as he closed it gently. She was snoring a remarkably tiny, ladylike snore, and James wondered if it was an enchanted sleep cast by the ghostly figure.

The halls were silent and dark, it being the very pit of night. Silvery blue moonlight sifted through the few windows. It occurred to James that he should have brought his wand. He couldn't do much with it yet, but he did know a basic Illumination Spell. He glanced around the pattern of moonlight and shadows that was the hall, seeking the ghostly shape. It was nowhere in sight. He chose a direction at random and trotted along it.

Several turns later, James was about to give up. He wasn't even sure he'd know his way back to the Gryffindor common room. The corridor here was high and narrow, with no windows and only one torch guttering redly near the archway he'd entered by. Closed doors lined the corridor on both sides, each one made of thick wood and braced with iron bars. Behind one of them, a gust of night wind made something creak, low and long, like the moan of a sleeping giant. The overall effect was rather frightening, but James couldn't quite bring himself to turn back just yet. He walked slowly down the corridor, the torch making his shadow stretch before him, flickering into blackness.

"Hello?" he said quietly, his voice hoarse, just above a whisper. "Are you still there? I can't see you."

There was no response. The corridor was growing colder. James stopped, squinting hopelessly into the shadows, and then turned around. Something flickered across the corridor inches from his face and he jumped. The white shape streamed through one of the doors, and James saw that that door wasn't entirely closed. Blue moonlight filled the space he could see through the crack. Trembling, James pushed the door and it creaked open. Almost immediately, the door caught on something, making a grating scrape. There were broken chunks of iron on the floor next to something long and black with a hook on the end. It was a crowbar. James kicked these aside and pushed the door further open, stepping in.

The room was long and dusty, cluttered with broken desks and chairs, apparently once sent here for repair, but long forgotten. The ceiling sloped down toward the back wall, where four windows glowed with moonlight. The window on the far right was broken. Glass glittered on the floor and one of the swinging

panes hung crookedly like a broken bat wing. The ghostly figure stood there, looking down at the broken glass, and then turned to look at James over its shoulder. It had resumed its human shape, and James gasped as he saw the young man's face. Then two things happened simultaneously. The ghostly shape evaporated in a wisp of silvery smoke, and there was a crash and clatter from the corridor outside.

James jumped and spun on the spot, peering out the door. He didn't see anything, but he could still hear an echoing clatter from the darkness. James leaned against the inside of the door, his heart thudding so hard that he could see dull green flashes in his peripheral vision. He glanced around the room, but it was completely dark and empty except for the cobwebby furniture and broken window. The ghostly man was gone. James took a deep breath, then turned and crept out into the corridor again.

There was another, smaller clatter. James could tell by the sound of it that it was further down the corridor, in the darkness. It echoed as if it were coming from another side room. Again, James berated himself for having forgotten his wand. He tiptoed into the darkness. After what felt like an age, there was another open door. He held onto the stonework of the doorframe and peered in.

James vaguely recognized the Potions storage room. There was a man in it. He was dressed in black jeans and a black shirt. James recognized him as the very same man he had seen the morning before at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, sneaking photographs. He stood on a stool, examining the shelves with a small penlight. On the floor by the stool were the shattered remains of a couple of small vials. As James watched, the man stuck the penlight in his teeth and groped for another jar on the top shelf, keeping a precarious hold on the opposite shelf with his free hand.

"*Heritah Herung*," he read to himself around the penlight, craning his neck to direct the light onto the jar. "What the heck ith thith thtufh?" His voice was a low, awed mutter. Suddenly, the man looked toward the door. His eyes made contact with James, and for a long moment, neither moved. James was sure the man would attack him. He was obviously an intruder, and James had seen him. He tried to will his feet to turn and run, but there seemed to be some disconnect between his brain and his lower extremities. He stood and stared, gripping the stonework of the doorway as if he meant to climb it. Then the man did the last thing James expected. He turned and ran.

He was gone almost before James realized it. The curtain at the back of the storage room still swayed where the man had blown through it. To James' great surprise, he darted to follow the man.

The Potions storage room led into the Potions classroom itself. Long, high tables stood in the darkness, their stools tucked neatly beneath them. James stopped and cocked his head. Footsteps echoed from the corridor beyond. His own feet smacked the stone floor as James dodged around the tables and out into the corridor, following the man.

The man was hesitating at a point where two corridors crossed. He looked desperately back and forth, then glanced up and saw James coming. The man let out the same high, little shriek James had heard him make when he'd been chased by the ghost. He slipped on the stones, his feet seeming to run in three directions at once, then he mastered them and ran clumsily down the broader corridor. James knew where he

was now. The man would come out onto the hall of the moving staircases. Even as James was thinking it, he heard another little shriek of surprise echoing back to him. He grinned as he ran.

James stuttered to a stop at a railing and leaned over, peering intently into the darkness of the floors below. At first, the subtle grinding of the stairs was the only noise, and then he heard the clatter of the man's shoes. There he was, holding onto a railing for dear life and stumbling down a staircase as it swiveled ponderously. James hesitated for a moment, then did something that he'd always wanted to do but never quite had the temerity to try: he clambered up on the railing of the nearest staircase, straddled it, and then let go.

The thick wooden railings, polished by generations of house-elves to a rocklike, glassy shine, were like beams of ice beneath James. He shot down the railing, craning his head over his shoulder to see where he was going. His hair, which had gotten lank with sweat in the minutes before, ruffled as air whipped past. When he neared the bottom, he gripped the railing again with both his arms and his legs, slowing, and then hopping lightly off the bottom. He cast around, looking for the man, and saw him clambering toward another landing, one floor below.

James' dad had told him about the moving staircases, had explained the secret of navigating them. James gauged the moving labyrinth, and then chose another staircase just as it began to swivel. He swung himself over the railing and let go, streaking down it as if it were greased. On one side was the swaying chasm of landings, staircases, and halls; on the other, the speed of the blurring stairs. James gritted his teeth and craned to look behind him again. The man was just reaching the landing below. He stumbled, disoriented, as he backed off the staircase, and then looked up just as James rocketed into him.

James hit the man at full speed, rebounded off him, and sprawled onto the flagstones of the landing. The man shrieked a third time, this time in frustration and surprise, as the force of the collision knocked him entirely off his feet. There was a piercingly loud crash, followed by a shower of tinkling glass. James rolled and covered his face instinctively. When silence descended again, James peeked through his fingers. There was a very large, roughly man-shaped hole in the stained-glass window at the foot of the landing. Through it, the spindly black fingers of trees swayed in a night breeze, scratching amiably at the star-strewn sky.

"*What* is going on up there?" a raspy voice called, vibrating with rage. James scrambled to his feet, being careful not to step on any of the broken glass with his bare feet. Gingerly, he edged as close to the hole as he could and peered down. It was hard to tell how high the window was. There was no noise from the night except the hiss of the wind in the treetops.

Mrs. Norris the cat streaked up a nearby staircase, her orange eyes baleful as she flicked her gaze over the window, the broken glass, and then James. Mr. Filch followed, puffing and cursing as he climbed.

"Oh," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "It's the Potter boy. Why, oh, why am I not surprised?"



“What were you thinking, Potter, chasing an unidentified individual, *through* the castle, *at* night, *alone*?” Headmistress McGonagall was standing behind her desk, leaning on it with both arms, ramrod straight. Her eyes were incredulous, her face scowling.

“I--” James began, but she raised one hand, stopping him.

“Don’t answer. I’ve no patience for it this morning.” She sighed and stood up straight, pushing up her glasses and pinching the bridge of her nose. “I’ve heard enough Potter explanations throughout the years to know the general shape of them, anyway.”

Filch stood nearby, the jut of his jaw and the glint of his eye showing his pleasure at catching the latest Potter troublemaker so quickly. Mrs. Norris purred in his arms like a small, furry engine. James risked a look around the Headmistress’ office. The room was still dim with very early morning shadows. The portraits of all the previous headmasters and headmistresses dozed in their frames. James could just see the portrait of his brother’s namesake, Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore was seated, his chin on his chest and his hat lowered over his eyes. His lips moved as he snored silently.

McGonagall lowered herself into her chair. “Mr. Potter, you, of all people, cannot tell me that you are not aware that there are rules against students wandering the school grounds at night.”

“No,” James said quickly. “Er, yes, I do know about the rules. But the ghost--”

McGonagall raised her hand again. “Yes, the ghost, I know.” Everything except her actual words expressed doubt about that part of his story. “But Mr. Potter, you understand that even if a ghost appears in a student’s bed chamber, that does not give said student a free pass to break whatever rules he deems temporarily inconvenient.”

Mr. Filch stirred, seeming to decide that now was the time to press the point as he saw it. “He destroyed the Heracles window, Headmistress. Priceless bit of glasswork. We’ll not find a replacement to match it, I’ll wager.” He sneered down at James as he finished.

“Windows are one thing, Mr. Filch,” McGonagall said, not looking at him, “but intruders on school grounds are quite another. I presume you’ve already arranged an inspection of the campus, beginning with the area outside the Heracles window?”

“Yes, ma’am, and we’ve found nothing. The Venus Rose Gardens are immediately below that window. They’re a bit of a mess, broken glass everywhere, but there’s no sign of any intruder. We’ve only got this boy’s word that there ever was such an intruder, Headmistress.”

“Yes,” McGonagall replied. “And unfortunately, in this case, that is a word I am inclined to trust. Someone obviously went through that window, unless you are suggesting that Mr. Potter himself came *in* through it.”

Filch ground his teeth and glared at James as if he wanted very much to suggest such a possibility.

“But he was in the Potions room, ma’am!” James insisted. “He broke some vials! They must still be there. And he broke in through a window not far from there. I saw it. The ghost led me there.”

McGonagall studied James carefully. “Mr. Potter, I believe that you saw someone, but the likelihood of that person actually having broken onto the school grounds from outside is extremely small. You are aware that Hogwarts is protected by the best security measures and Anti-Magic spells available. No witch or wizard, regardless of their skills, can possibly get into these halls unless they are supposed to be here.”

“That’s just it, ma’am,” James said earnestly. “I don’t think he was a wizard. I think he was a Muggle!”

He’d expected gasps of surprise from the Headmistress and Filch, but there were none. The Headmistress merely gazed at him, her expression unchanging. Filch glanced from her to James and back, then let out his breath in a nasty little laugh.

“You’ve got to hand it to ‘em, Headmistress. They get a little more creative every year.”

“James,” McGonagall said, her voice softer, “the unplotable nature of the school, as well as the innumerable Disillusionment Charms that blanket the grounds, make it truly impossible for any Muggle, no matter how persistent, to ever find their way in. You know that, don’t you?”

James sighed and tried not to roll his eyes. “Yes. But that doesn’t change what I saw. It was a Muggle, ma’am. He used a crowbar. And a penlight. Not a wand.”

McGonagall read his face for a long moment, and then turned businesslike. “Well, Mr. Potter, if you are correct, then we have a situation on our hands that certainly needs remedying. You may trust that we will look into the matter. However, in the meantime, there is still the issue of breaking curfew, as well as the damaged window. Under the circumstances, I won’t blame you for the latter, but you must still face the consequences for the former. You will serve two hours of detention with Mr. Filch this Saturday night.”

“But--” James began, then Filch’s hand descended heavily onto his shoulder.

“I’ll take care of the lad, Headmistress,” he growled. “It’s not too late to save ‘em when you catch ‘em early. Is it, young lad?”

“Potter,” McGonagall said, apparently having already moved on to other matters, “take Mr. Filch up to the Potions closet and the other broken window, won’t you? Let’s try to get things cleaned up before classes if we can. Good morning, gentlemen.”

James stood miserably and Filch guided him to the door with the great, callused hand on his shoulder.

“Come along, my lad. We’ve got mischief to rectify, haven’t we?”

On the way out, James saw that one of the headmaster portraits was not sleeping. The eyes of that headmaster were black, like the lanky hair that framed the white face. Severus Snape studied James coldly, only his eyes moving to follow as Filch marched him from the room.



Tina Curry, the Muggle Studies Professor, led the class briskly out onto the lawn. The day which had started rather brightly was now turning grey and blustery. Gusts of wind sprang up and flapped the edges of Professor Curry’s sport cloak and the nets Hagrid was trying to hang on the wooden frame he had just finished assembling.

“Expertly done, Hagrid,” Curry called as she approached, the class trotting to keep up. “Sturdy as a barn, I daresay.”

Hagrid looked up, losing his grasp on the netting as he did so and scrambling to catch it. “Thank yeh, Ms. Curry. Weren’t what yeh might call a challenge. Up to this part, o’ course, which is a might hairy.”

Hagrid’s construction was a simple wooden framework, roughly rectangular. There was another one several dozen yards away, its netting strung taut and swishing in the stiffening breeze.

“Curry’s new this year, if you haven’t guessed,” Ted commented to James as they gathered. “Has some pretty crazy ideas about how to learn about Muggles. Makes a fellow wish he hadn’t pushed off taking this class until his last year.”

“As if these outfits weren’t bad enough,” Damien said sourly, glancing down at his shorts and socks. Every Thursday, Muggle Studies class was required to dress out in shorts, athletic shoes, and one of two colors of Hogwarts jerseys. Half the class was wearing burgundy, the other half, gold.

“You wouldn’t look quite so, er, interesting, Damien, if you had some white socks,” Sabrina said as diplomatically as she could.

Damien gave her a *tell-me-something-I-don’t-know* look. “Thanks, sweetie. Tell my mum that next time she goes shopping at Sears and bloody Roe-mart”

Zane didn’t bother to correct Damien. He beamed with annoying good cheer, obviously far more comfortable in the outfit than the rest. “I have a good feeling about this. The breeze will air some of you vampires out. Lighten up.”

Damien hooked a thumb toward Zane. “Why is he even *in* this class?”

“He’s right, Damien,” Ted said good-naturedly. “Shake out the old batwings a bit, why don’t you?”

“All right, class,” Curry called, clapping her hands for attention. “Let’s look orderly, shall we? Form two lines, please. Burgundy over here, gold over there. That’s very nice.”

As the lines formed, Professor Curry produced a long basket from under her arm. She paced to the head of the burgundy line. “Wands out,” she called. Each student produced his or her wand and held them at the ready, some of the first years glancing around to see if they were holding theirs correctly. James saw Zane sneak a peek at Ted, then swap his wand from his right hand to his left.

“Excellent,” Curry said, holding the basket out. “In here, then, please.” She began to pace along the line, watching the students reluctantly drop their wands into the basket. There was a mass groan throughout the gathered students. “You all surely can tell your wands apart, I expect. Come, come, if we are to learn anything about the Muggle world, we must learn how to think *non-magically*. That means, of course, no wands. Thank you, Mr. Metzker. Mr. Lupin. Ms. Hildegard. And you, Ms. McMillan. Thank you. Now. Is that everyone?”

A very unenthusiastic noise of assent came from the students.

“Hup, hup, students,” Curry chirped as she laid the basket of wands next to Hagrid’s framework. “Are you implying that you are so dependent upon magic that you are unable to play a simple, a *very* simple game? Hmm?” She glanced around at the students, her sharp nose pointed slightly upwards. “I should hope not. But before we begin, let us have a bit of discussion about why it is important for us to study the ways and means of the Muggle world. Anyone?”

James avoided Curry’s eyes as she looked from student to student. There was silence but for the gusting wind in the nearby trees and the flap of the banners over the castle.

“We learn about Muggles so that we will not forget the fact that, despite our myriad differences, we are all human,” Curry said crisply and emphatically. “When we forget our essential similarities, we forget how to get along, and that cannot but lead to prejudice, discrimination, and eventually, conflict.” She allowed the echo of her words to diminish, and then brightened. “Besides, the non-magical nature of our

Muggle friends has forced them to be inventive in ways that the magical world has never achieved. The result, students, are games so simple and elegant that they require no broomsticks, no enchanted Snitches, no flying Bludgers. The only things necessary are two nets,” she indicated Hagrid’s new structures with a sweep of her left arm, then held something else aloft with her right, “and one single ball.”

“Excellent,” Zane said ironically, gazing at the ball in Curry’s upraised hand. “I came to a school of magic to learn to play soccer.”

“Around here, we call it ‘football,’” Damien said sourly.

“Madam Curry,” a pleasant female voice said. James looked for the speaker. Tabitha Corsica stood near the end of the opposite line, all but cringing in her gold jersey. She wore a black sport cloak over it, tied neatly at her throat. A group of other Slytherins stood in line near her, the distaste very clear on their faces. “Why is it necessary, exactly, for us to learn to play a Muggle, er, sport? Might it not be sufficient to read about Muggle histories and, ahem, lifestyles? After all, even if they desired to, witches and wizards are not allowed to compete in Muggle sporting competitions, according to international magical law. Am I correct?”

“Indeed you are, Ms. Corsica,” Curry answered quickly. “And have you any idea why that might be?”

Tabitha raised her eyebrows and smiled politely. “I’m sure I don’t, ma’am.”

“The answer to your question lies therein, Ms. Corsica,” Curry said, turning away from Tabitha. “Anyone else?”

A boy James recognized as a third-year Hufflepuff raised his hand. “Ma’am? I think it’s because wizards would throw off the balance of competition if they used magic.”

Curry motioned for him to elaborate. “Go on, Mr. Terrel.”

“Well, my mum works for the Ministry and she says there are international laws that keep wizards from using magic to win Muggle sporting events or lotteries or contests and the like. If witches and wizards got into a Muggle sport and used any magic, they’d be able to run circles around any Muggle, wouldn’t they?”

“You are speaking of the International Department for the Prevention of Unfair Advantage, Mr. Terrel, and you are, more or less, correct.” Curry dropped the ball to the ground at her feet and kicked it lightly. It rolled a couple of yards across the grass. “To be honest, it is not accurate to say that witches and wizards are forbidden from competing in Muggle sports. There are allowances for persons of magical heritage who do wish to compete. However, they must agree to undergo certain spells that, performed upon themselves with the help of wizarding officials, temporarily nullify their magical abilities. If this were not so…”

Professor Curry produced her own wand from an inner pocket of her cloak and pointed it at the ball. “*Velocito Expendum*,” she trilled. She pocketed the wand, and then strolled toward the ball. She kicked it in a

casual, offhand manner. The ball virtually exploded off her foot. It shot across the grass and hit the netting of the goal with a sharp smack, belling the netting outward as if the ball had been shot from a cannon.

“Well, you get the point,” Curry said, turning back to the double line of students. “The Wizard-Muggle Sportsmanship Program is, as you might imagine, distasteful enough that virtually no wizards or witches have participated in it. That is not to say, however, that many witches and wizards do not attempt to circumvent these laws each year, upsetting the fairness of the Muggle sporting world.”

“Madam Curry?” Tabitha said again, raising her hand. “Is it true, then, that the Ministry, and the international magical community, believe Muggles are unable to cope with the skills of the magical world, and that witches and wizards must be hobbled in order to be considered equal with them?”

For the first time, Professor Curry seemed rather ruffled. “Miss Corsica, that is hardly a discussion for this class. If you wish to discuss the political machinations of the Ministry--”

“I’m sorry, Madam Curry,” Tabitha said, smiling disarmingly. “I was just curious. This being a class devoted to the study of Muggles, I thought we might be planning to discuss the obvious disrespect for the Muggle world that the magical community has shown by assuming them too feeble to deal with our existence. Please forgive my interruption and carry on.”

Curry stared at Tabitha, obviously fuming, but the damage had been done. James heard whispers all around, saw the sideways looks and nods of agreement. He noticed that the Slytherin students were still wearing their blue ‘Question the Victors’ badges, having pinned them to their gold jerseys.

“Yes,” Curry said curtly. “Well, then. Shall we begin?”

For the next forty minutes, she led them through drills and ball-handling techniques. James had been unenthusiastic at first, but began to warm to the simplistic nature of the sport. Besides disallowing wands, football apparently demanded that players not even use their hands. The pure silliness of it amused and intrigued James. Few of the students were any good at the sport, which allowed them to approach it without being afraid of getting it wrong. Zane had, of course, played football before, although he claimed very little skill at it. Sure enough, James noticed that Zane didn’t seem to be much better at running down the field with the ball than anyone else. As James watched, Zane tangled his feet around the ball and fell over it. The ball squirted out from under him and Zane simply lay there, staring up at the marching clouds with a look of thoughtful grimness on his face.

Tabitha Corsica and her Slytherins stood in a disdainful huddle in a corner of the makeshift field, one of the footballs lying forlornly in the grass between them. They made no attempt to practice the drills, and Curry seemed to have dismissed them, spending her time near the goal, where students were taking place kicks into the net.

James found that he was enjoying himself. He dug his heels into the grass, eyed the ball lying twenty feet ahead of him, and then charged it. He timed his steps carefully, planted his left foot next to the ball and

kicked it solidly with his right. The thump of it leaving his foot was surprisingly satisfying. The ball sailed through a smooth arc and through the reaching arms of Professor Curry, who was acting as goalie. There was a thump and swish as the ball struck the net.

“Very nice, Mr. Potter,” Curry called, breathing hard. Her hair had come askew and hung in loose curls around her thin face. She pushed up her sleeves and bent to retrieve the ball. “Very nice, indeed.”

James smiled despite himself as he trotted to the back of the line.

“Teacher’s pet,” Zane muttered as James passed.

“Nice foot, Potter,” Ted called as the class finally headed back to the castle. “We need to work that into the Wocket routine somehow. Sabrina, think of something we can do with that. High-kicking aliens from the planet Goalatron or something. Got it?”

“Aye, aye,” Sabrina called, saluting as she entered the castle gate. “By the way, Captain, you’ve got grass stains on your bum. Nice work.”



After lunch, James and Zane joined Ralph in the library for a study period. As they unpacked their books and spread them around a corner table, Ralph seemed even more melancholy than usual.

“What’s going on, Ralph?” Zane said, trying to keep his voice low so as not to attract the attention of Professor Slughorn, who was monitoring the library that period. “Your Slytherin buddies tell you your underwear aren’t magical enough or something?”

Ralph looked around cautiously. “I got in trouble this morning with Professor Slughorn.”

“Seems to be going around,” James said. “I spent my morning in McGonagall’s office getting detention.”

“McGonagall?” Ralph and Zane both exclaimed. “You first, then, James. McGonagall outranks Slughorn,” Ralph said.

James told about the ghost the night before, and about being led to the Muggle intruder and the chase that followed.

“That was you?” Ralph asked incredulously. “We all saw the broken window on the way down to breakfast. Filch was covering it with canvas and muttering away under his breath. He looked like he wanted us to ask him about it so he could rant and rave a bit.”

“Who do you think it was?” Zane prodded James.

“I don’t know. All I know is that it was the same guy I saw hiding out by the forest the other morning. And I think he’s a Muggle.”

“So?” Zane said, shrugging. “I’m a Muggle. Ralph’s a Muggle.”

“No you aren’t. You’re Muggle-born, but you’re both wizards. This guy was just a plain old Muggle. Although, according to McGonagall, that’s impossible. No Muggle can get past the school’s Disillusionment Charms.”

“Why not? What happens?” Ralph asked.

“Well, for one thing, like I said on the train, Hogwarts is unplottable. It can’t be mapped. Also, no Muggle has ever heard of it. And, even if some Muggle did just happen to wander into the grounds, the Disillusionment Charms would guide them around so they didn’t even know they were passing us. If they tried to push through the Disillusionment Charms, they’d just get all disoriented and doubt themselves. Their compasses would go all wacky and they’d end up turning around even without knowing it. You can’t just force your way through that kind of Disillusionment Charm. The whole point of it is to deflect anybody who isn’t supposed to get in, and make them believe the deflection was their idea.”

Zane frowned. “So how do any of us get in, then?”

“Well, we’re all basically Secret-Keepers, aren’t we?” James said, and then had to explain the idea of being a Secret-Keeper, about how only a Secret-Keeper could find the secret place or lead others there. “Of course, it all gets a lot less secure with this many of us. That’s why there are laws against even Muggle parents of students telling anyone.”

“Yeah, my parents had to sign some big non-disclosure agreement before I came,” Zane said, as if the very idea was the greatest thing he’d ever heard. “It said that any ‘privileged Muggles’ like my parents weren’t allowed to talk to any other Muggles about Hogwarts or the magical community. If they did, the contract would kick in and their tongues would curl up until somebody from the Ministry came to release the spell. Excellent.”

“Yeah,” James said, “Ted told me about a Muggle-born girl he dated his third year. Her parents accidentally mentioned Hogwarts at a dinner party and their hosts called the Muggle paramedics because they

thought both of them were having some sort of weird seizure at exactly the same time. The Ministry had to do memory modifications on everybody. It was a mess, but it was pretty funny.”

“Cool,” Ralph said meaningfully. “Hey, I should’ve used one of those Disillusionment Charms on my duffle bag. Would’ve saved me some trouble.”

Zane turned to him. “So what’s the deal, Ralphie? What kind of trouble are you causing now?”

“It wasn’t me!” Ralph protested, and then lowered his voice, glancing toward the front desk. Slughorn was reclined behind it, peering at a gigantic book through a pair of tiny spectacles and drinking something frothy in a stoneware mug. Ralph grimaced and sighed. “Slughorn found my GameDeck this morning. He said I left it in the common room. He was all diplomatic about it, but he told me I wanted to be very careful about things like that. Said I should probably try to leave my ‘Muggle toys’ at home.”

James furrowed his brow. “I thought you said it’d gone missing a few days ago?”

Ralph became animated. “It did! That’s what I mean! *I* didn’t leave it in the common room! I’m about to chuck the stupid thing in the toilet! Somebody took it out of my bag and left it out there for Slughorn to find. I hate those guys!” Ralph’s voice had descended to a harsh whisper. He glanced around quickly, as if he expected his housemates to pop out from behind the nearest bookcase.

Zane looked thoughtful. “You don’t know who took it?”

“No,” Ralph said sarcastically. “I’m pretty sure that was the point.”

“You have it with you?”

“Yeah,” Ralph said, deflating a bit. “I’m not letting it out of my sight until I can get rid of it. It doesn’t work all that well around here anyway. Too much magic in the air or something.” He dug the game console out of his backpack and handed it under the table to Zane.

James watched as Zane worked the buttons swiftly and the screen came to life. “If anybody sees you with that thing,” Ralph muttered, “it’s yours. Happy Christmas.”

Zane pressed buttons fluidly, making the screen flash and cycle. “I’m just checking to see if the last person who played it made a profile.”

“What’s a profile?” James asked, leaning to look at the screen.

Zane waved him away without looking up. “Don’t look. Slughorn will see. Ralph, tell Mr. Wizard here what a game profile is.”

“It’s just a way to keep track of your game,” Ralph whispered. “Before you play, you create a profile, with a name and stuff, usually just something made up. Then anything you do in the game is recorded under that profile. When you come back later and log in to that profile, you can pick up wherever you left off.”

“You ‘the Ralphinator?’” Zane asked, still working the GameDeck.

“I’m not even going to answer that,” Ralph said flatly.

“Here we are then,” Zane said, stubbing a finger at the screen. “Does the name ‘Austramaddux’ mean anything to you?”

“No,” Ralph said, raising his eyebrows. “There’s a profile with that name?”

“Right here. Created around midnight day before last. No other info and no game progress at all.”

James blinked. “No game progress?”

“Nope,” Zane said, shutting the device down and passing it back to Ralph under the table. “Plenty of login time, but no actual gaming. Probably couldn’t figure out that D-pad up and the left shoulder button worked the super attack. Newbies.”

James rolled his eyes. “So what’s it mean? Who is Austra-whatsisname?”

“It’s just a made up name, like I said,” Ralph said, stuffing the GameDeck into the bottom of his bag. “It doesn’t mean anything. Right?”

Ralph said the last to Zane, who was sitting across the table looking almost comically thoughtful. He had his head tilted, his brow furrowed, and one corner of his mouth cinched up, dimpling his cheek. After a moment, he shook his head. “I don’t know. It’s familiar. Seems like somebody just mentioned that name, but I can’t place it.”

“Well, all I know,” Ralph said, propping his chin on his hands, “is I’m dumping this thing off with my dad at the break. I’m sorry I ever saw it.”

“Mr. Potter,” a voice suddenly boomed nearby. All three of them jumped. It was Professor Slughorn. He had approached the table and was suddenly standing behind James’ chair. “I had hoped to run into you. So good to see you, my boy. So good indeed.”

James forced a smile as Slughorn patted him on the back. “Thank you, sir.”

“You know, I know your father. Met him when he was a student here and not yet the famous Auror that he is now, of course.” Slughorn nodded knowingly, winking, as if Harry Potter had not, in fact, been enormously famous even before he’d become Head Auror. “He’s mentioned me, no doubt. Very close we were at the time. Of course, I’ve lost track of him in the years since, what with my teaching, pottering about, turning into an old man, and his getting married, developing his illustrious career, and making fine young men like yourself.” Slughorn punched James playfully on the shoulder. “I look forward to catching up with him a bit during his visit next week. Do tell him to look me up, won’t you?”

“I will, sir,” James said, rubbing his shoulder.

“Good, good. Well, I’ll leave you boys to your studies, then. Carry on, er, lads,” Slughorn said, glancing at Ralph and Zane with no apparent recognition, despite the fact that he and Ralph had spoken that very morning.

“Oh. Uh, Professor Slughorn? Could I ask you a question?” It was Zane.

Slughorn glanced back, eyebrows raised. “Why, certainly, er, Mr.?”

“Walker, sir. It was your Potions One class, I believe. You mentioned someone named Austramaddux?”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Walker. Wednesday afternoon, was it? Now I recall.” Slughorn glanced distractedly toward the front desk. “Yes, not really potions-related, but his name did come up. Austramaddux was a historian and Seer from the distant past. His writings are considered, well, apocryphal at best. I believe I was making a little joke, Mr. Walker.”

“Oh. Well, thank you, sir,” Zane replied.

“Never a problem, my boy,” Slughorn assured him, glancing around the library. “And now, I must return to my duties. I’ll not distract you further.”

“That was quite a coincidence,” Ralph whispered, leaning over the desk as Slughorn drifted away.

“Not really,” Zane reasoned. “He mentioned Austramaddux in class as a joke. I remember now. It seemed to be a reference to a source that isn’t all that trustworthy or is a little loopy. The way we’d refer to a tabloid or a conspiracy theory or something. Slughorn’s head of Slytherin House, so he probably uses that same reference among your guys. They’d know it. That’s why the one that made off with your GameDeck knew the name.”

“I suppose,” Ralph said doubtfully.

“But why?” James asked. “Why use a name that means ‘don’t trust me, I’m a loon?’”

“Who knows what dopiness lurks in the hearts of Slytherins?” Zane said dismissively.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” James insisted. “Slytherins are usually all about image. They love all that cloak and dagger stuff, with the dragons’ heads and secret passwords. I just don’t get why one of them would use a name that their own Head of House treats like a joke.”

“Whatever,” Ralph said. “I have actual homework to do, so if you two don’t mind...”

They all spent the next half hour working on their homework. When it was time to pack up, Zane turned to James. “Quidditch tryouts tonight, right?”

“Mine, yeah. Yours, too?”

Zane nodded. “Looks like we’ll be sharing the field. Good luck, mate.” Zane shook James’ hand.

James felt surprisingly touched. “Thanks! You too.”

“Of course, you’ll rip it up out there,” Zane pronounced airily. “I’ll be lucky to stay on top of a broom. How long have you been flying, anyway?”

“I only ever flew a toy broom around the house when I was little,” said James. “The laws used to be pretty loose about brooms. There were underage height and distance restrictions, but pretty much anyone of any age could take one up as long as they were careful not to be seen by any Muggles. Then, back around the time Dad got his honorary diploma from Hogwarts, some teenagers got drunk on Firewhisky and tried to play Quidditch in Trafalgar Square. Since then, the laws have been tightened up. Now it’s almost like getting a Muggle driver’s license. We have to take flight lessons and get certified before we can fly legally. Some wizarding families will still let their kids go up on a broom in the backyard and stuff, just to practice. But my dad being an Auror...”

“Both your dad and your mom were big-time Quidditch players, though, right?” Zane asked, nudging James with an elbow and grinning. “Even if you don’t even know which end of a broom is up, you’ll still be killer on it when you hit the field. Metaphorically, of course.”

James smiled uncomfortably.

They headed to their classes. James couldn’t help feeling nervous. He’d nearly forgotten all about Quidditch tryouts. The knowledge that he’d be out there in a few hours, getting on one of the team brooms for the first time and trying to be one of the few first years to make the Gryffindor team left him feeling vaguely sick. He thought of the Snitch he’d grown up playing with, his famous Dad’s famous first Snitch. Back then, he’d never doubted his future. The way Uncle Ron talked about it, it was almost James’ birthright to be on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team his first year, and James had never questioned it. But now that it was imminent, he was afraid. The fears he had felt during the Sorting ceremony all came back. But that had turned out all right, he reminded himself. He’d been so worried about it, he’d almost talked the Sorting Hat into sending him to Slytherin House with Ralph, and he knew now what a mistake that would’ve been. The key was to relax. Quidditch, like being a Gryffindor, was in his blood. He had to just let it happen and not worry.

By dinner, he had to admit his plan wasn’t working. He could barely eat.

“That’s right, Potter,” Noah nodded, seeing James’ untouched plate. “The less you eat, the less you’ll have to throw up when you’re in the air. Of course, some of us see a little well-aimed sick as a great defensive technique. You’ve had your first broom lesson with Professor Ridcully, right?”

James drooped and rolled his eyes, “No. I haven’t. First class is on Monday.”

Noah looked serious for a moment, and then shrugged. “Eh, you’ll do fine. Brooms are easy. Lean forward to go, pull back to stop. Lean and roll into turns. Piece of cake.”

“Yeah,” Ted agreed. “And all the rain and wind out there will only make it easier. You probably won’t even be able to see the ground, what with the fog. Easier to trust your guts.”

“Just as long as you keep them on the inside,” somebody called from further down the table. There was a chorus of laughter. James dropped his head onto his folded arms.



The Quidditch pitch was sodden and muddy. Rain fell in great sheets, beating the ground and creating a dense mist that drenched James to the skin within the first minute. Justin Kennely, the Gryffindor Captain, led his group out onto the field, yelling over the steady roar of the rain.

“Quidditch isn’t called on account of rain,” he bellowed. “Some of the best Quidditch matches have taken place in weather like this, and much worse. The nineteen eighty-four Quidditch World Cup was held with a typhoon off the coast of Japan, you know. The Seekers both flew over sixty miles chasing the Snitch in gale-force winds. This is a trickle by comparison. Perfect weather for tryouts.”

Kennely stopped and turned in the center of the pitch, rain running from the tips of his nose and chin. There was a large Quidditch trunk at his feet, as well as a line of broomsticks neatly laid out on the wet grass. James saw that most of the house brooms were Nimbus Two Thousands, serviceable but rather obsolete models. He was a little relieved. If he’d been asked to fly a new Thunderstreak, he was pretty sure he’d have ended up in a tree a hundred miles away. At the opposite end of the pitch, James saw the Ravenclaw team assembling. He couldn’t recognize any of them through the spattering rain and mist.

“All right, then,” Kennely called out. “First years, you’re up first. I’m told that some of you haven’t yet had your first broom lessons, but thanks to new regulations and the disclaimers you all signed before school, there’s no reason you can’t climb on up and give it a go. Let’s see what you can do before we try anything with the rest of the team. No worries about formations or stunts, let’s just see you get in the air and navigate the field without knocking each other to your dooms.”

James felt his stomach plummet. He had hoped to spend some time watching the older students practice. Now that he was about to climb onto his first broom, he wished he had paid more attention to how the players handled them during the matches he’d been to, rather than looking for the spectacular stunts and messiest Bludger hits. The other first years were already moving forward, picking brooms and holding out their hands to summon them. James forced himself to join them.

He stopped next to a broom and stared down at it. For the first time, the thing looked like nothing more than a chunk of wood with a brush on the end instead of a sleek flying apparatus. Rain dripped from the sodden bristles. James held his hand over it.

“Up!” he said. His voice seemed tiny and silly to him. Nothing happened. He swallowed past something that felt like a steel marble in his throat. “Up!” he called again. The broom bobbed, and then dropped back to the grass with a dull smack. He glanced around at the other first years. None of them seemed to be having much more luck. Only one of them had succeeded in raising his broom. The older players were gathered around watching with amusement, nudging each other. Noah caught James’ eye and hoisted his thumb into the air, nodding encouragingly.

“Up!” James called again, mustering as much authority as he could. The broom bobbed again and James caught it before it could drop back. *Close enough*, he thought. He gave a huge sigh, then slung a leg over the broom. It floated uncertainly beneath him, barely supporting its own weight.

Something swooped past him. “Way to go!” Ted cried over the rain as a first-year girl named Baptiste swept upward, wobbling slightly. Two more first years kicked off. One of them slipped sideways and swung, dangling from the bottom of his broom. He hung on for a second or two, then his fingers slipped from the wet broomstick and he tumbled to the ground. There was a roar of amiable laughter. “At least you got into the air, Klein!” somebody called.

James pressed his lips together. Gripping the broomstick so tightly his knuckles turned white, he kicked off. The broom bobbed up and James saw the grass glide beneath him, then he began to descend again. His feet skidded and he wobbled, trying to kick up again. The broomstick arced upward and picked up speed, but James couldn’t seem to make it maintain any height. He was skidding along the grass again, sending up rooster tails of muddy water. Hollers of encouragement erupted behind him. He concentrated furiously, holding his breath and kicking along as the broom weaved toward the Ravenclaws, who turned to watch. *Up*, he thought desperately, *up, up, up!* He remembered Noah’s advice at dinner: lean forward to go, pull back to stop. He realized he was pulling on the broomstick, trying to make it rise, but that wasn’t right, was it? He had to lean forward to go. But if he leaned forward, common sense told him he’d simply plow into the ground. Ravenclaws began to sidle away as he approached, trying to get out of his path. They were all calling advice and warnings. None of it made any sense to James. Finally, desperately, James abandoned his own logic, lifted his feet and leaned forward as far as he could.

The sense of speed was shocking as the broom rocketed forward. Mist and rain stung James’ face and the grass beneath him became a blur of muddy green. But he wasn’t going up, he was merely streaking along the ground. He heard shouts and exclamations as he plowed through the Ravenclaws. They scrambled and leaped to get out of the way. He was still picking up speed as he leaned forward. Ahead of him, the ramparts of the grandstand filled his vision, getting alarmingly close. James tried to lean, to steer aside. He felt himself banking, but not enough. *Up*, he thought furiously, he needed to go *up!* Finally, for lack of a better idea, he leaned back, pulling the broomstick as hard as he could. The broom responded instantly and with sickening

force, angling into a steep climb. The grandstands fell away. Rows of seats and banners flickered past, and then gave way to an enormous, grey sky.

Motion seemed to stop, despite the air and rain that barreled past him. James risked a glance behind him. The Quidditch pitch looked like a postage stamp, shrinking and growing hazy behind a raft of clouds and mist. James gasped, inhaling wind and rain, panic gripping him like giant claws. He was still climbing. Great grey slabs of cloud barreled past, buffeting him with shocking darkness and cold. James shoved down on the broom again, gritting his teeth and stifling a cry of terror.

He felt the broomstick dip sickeningly, almost hurling him off. He couldn't seem to make it do anything other than drastic altitude changes. James had lost all sense of direction. He was surrounded by rain and dense clouds. For the first time, getting on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team seemed much less important than simply getting both feet back on the ground, wherever it was. He couldn't gauge how fast he was going or in what direction. Wind and mist tore at his face, making his eyes water.

Suddenly, there were other shapes nearby. They swooped around him out of the clouds. He heard distant yelling, calls, his name. One of the shapes angled toward him and James was shocked to see Zane on a broomstick, his face chalk white, his blonde hair whipping wildly around his head. He motioned at James as he banked, but James couldn't make sense of his gestures.

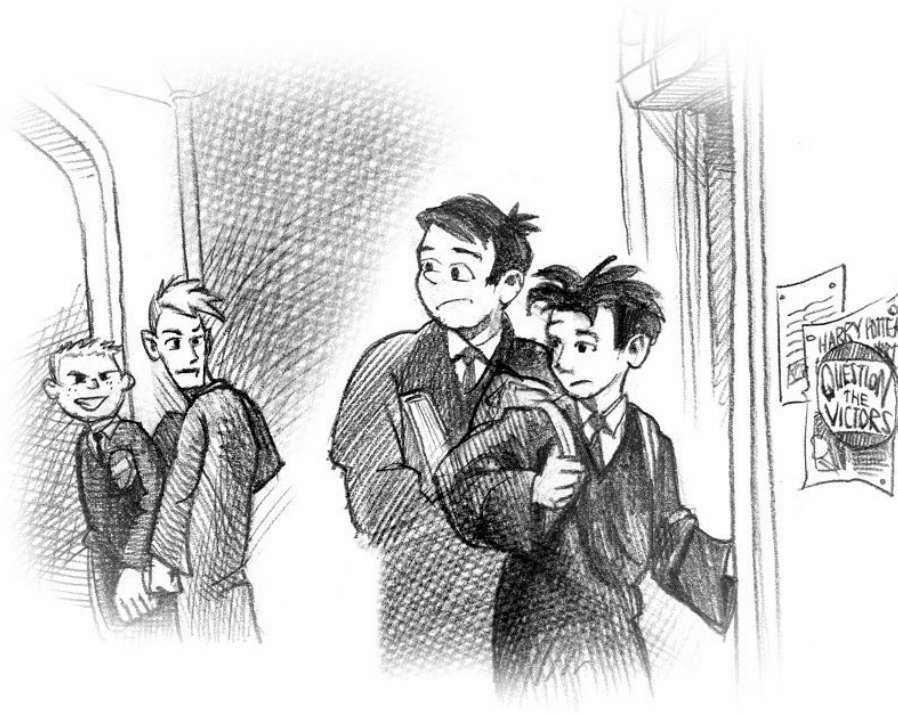
"Follow me!" Zane shouted over the wind as he swooped by.

The other figures resolved as they centered on James. He saw Ted and Gennifer, the Ravenclaw. They moved into formation around him. Ted was calling directions to James, but he couldn't make them out. He concentrated on angling the broom in the direction that Zane was flying. The clouds barreled past again like freight trains, and James lost sight of the other flyers. There was a buffeting shock of cold air, and then the ground opened up beneath James, swaying with enormous finality. The Quidditch pitch was rising to meet him, its matted grass looking very hard and unforgiving. Zane was still ahead of James, but he was pulling back, slowing, gesturing wildly with one hand. James pulled back on his own broomstick, trying to emulate Zane, but the force of the wind roaring past fought him. He battled it, turning, wrestling the broomstick up so that he feared it might snap beneath him. And then his rain-slicked hands slipped, fumbled and he fell backwards, gripping the broom desperately with only his legs. He was spinning wildly, end over end. James felt the force of Zane whipping past, Zane's shouts diminishing behind him with horrible speed. The ground swooped around his head, reaching up to embrace him, and James heard the sound of it, a huge, low roar, getting louder and louder until...

There was a horrible jolt. James squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to hear the sound of his body hitting the ground. There was no sound. He risked opening his eyes just a tiny bit, and then looked around with relief and surprise. He was hovering five feet above the center of the Quidditch pitch, still straddling his broom, but not holding on. Rain hissed all around him as the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors stared at him. Zane, Ted, and Gennifer drifted down around James, gawping at him. Then Ted turned. James followed his eyes.

Ralph stood on the edge of the field, his robes soaked through and sticking to him, an umbrella lying abandoned at the edge of the grandstands. Every muscle in Ralph's body seemed to be tensed, straining, as he held his ridiculous, enormous wand straight out, pointing it at James. He was trembling visibly. Rain streamed down his face, matting his hair to his forehead.

“Do I have to keep this up?” he said through gritted teeth. “Or can I let go now?”



5. THE BOOK OF AUSTRAMADDUX

“Don’t think of it as looking like a miserable failure on a broomstick,” Zane said afterwards as they all sat in the Ravenclaw common room. “Think of it as giving Ralphie here a chance to look positively brilliant!”

James said nothing. He sat slumped at the end of the couch, his head propped miserably on his hand.

“Besides, if I hadn’t hopped on my broomstick and took off after you, I don’t think I’d have been able to figure it out at all. It was just a matter of not thinking about it, really.”

“Spectacular stuff out there, Walker,” an older student said as he passed the couch, ruffling Zane’s damp hair.

“Yeah,” another one said from across the room. “Normally, first years tryouts are just for laughs. With you, we get the laughs *and* the skills.” There was a round of laughter and scattered applause. Zane beamed, soaking it up.

“Seriously, though,” Ralph said from where he sat on the floor, his back to the fire, “how’d you do that? Flying is supposed to be pretty tough to master.”

“I dunno, honestly,” Zane said. “I saw James heading into the stratosphere and I just took off after him. I hardly even knew I was doing it until the very end, when I realized I was nose-diving straight into the pitch. I pulled up at the last second, just as the human torpedo here went past me, and I thought, ‘Look at me! I’m flying!’ Maybe it was all those racing games and flight simulators I grew up playing with my dad. The feel of it all just made sense to me.” Zane suddenly seemed to realize this conversation wasn’t lifting James’ mood much. “But enough about me and my broom. What about *you*, Ralphie?”

Ralph blinked thoughtfully, and then picked up his wand from where it lay on his wet cloak. It was just as huge and ridiculous as always, still with the tip whittled down and painted lime green, but nobody was laughing at it anymore. “I don’t know. It’s like you said, isn’t it? I just didn’t think about it. I saw James falling and I thought of the feather in Flitwick’s class. Next thing I know, I’m pointing my wand at him and yelling--”

Several students, including Zane, ducked and called out as Ralph flicked his wand ahead of him. Ralph smiled sheepishly. “Get a grip, everybody. I wasn’t gonna say it.”

“Ralph, you’re the real deal, mate,” Zane said, recovering. “You went from floating a feather to a human body in one class, you know? My boy’s got talent.”

James stirred. “If you two are done congratulating yourselves, I’m gonna go find a hole and live in it for the rest of the year.”

“Hey, I’ll bet Grawp’s girlfriend has room in her cave,” Ralph said. Zane did a double take at Ralph, open-mouthed.

“What?” Ralph said. “It’ll save him some time looking!”

“He’s joking,” Zane said, glancing at James. “I couldn’t tell at first.”

“Congratulations on making the team,” James said quietly, standing and collecting his cloak from a hook by the fire.

“Hey, really,” Zane said awkwardly. “I’m sorry about how things worked out. I didn’t know it was that important to you. Really.”

James stood still for several seconds, staring into the fire. Zane’s expression of regret struck him deeply. His heart ached. His face heated and his eyes burned. He blinked and looked away.

“It wasn’t that important to me, really,” he said. “It was just really, really important.”

As the door closed behind James, he heard Ralph say, “So who was it important to?”

James walked slowly, his head down. His clothes were still damp, and his body ached from the jolt of Ralph levitating him at the end of his long dive, but he barely noticed those things. He had failed. After the victory of becoming a Gryffindor, he’d been cautiously confident that Quidditch, too, would work out.

Instead, he'd ended up looking like a complete fool in front of both the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. Far from the spectacular aerobatic displays his dad had legendarily performed, James had to be rescued from killing himself. There was no surviving this kind of failure. He'd never live it down. Nobody was making fun of him now, at least to his face, but what would they say next year when he showed up for tryouts again? He couldn't even bear to think about it.

How would he tell his dad? His dad, who would be coming at the beginning of next week to see him and hear of his exploits. He'd understand, of course. He'd tell James Quidditch didn't matter, that the important thing was for him to be himself and have fun. And he'd even mean it. And still, knowing that didn't make James feel any better.

Zane had made the Ravenclaw team, though. James felt a stab of bitter jealousy at that. He felt immediately sorry for it, but that didn't make the jealousy go away. Zane was Muggle-born. And an American, to boot! Quidditch was supposed to be a baffling mystery to him, and James was supposed to be the instinctive flyer, the rescuing hero. Not the other way around. How could things have gone so totally wrong so fast?

When he reached the Gryffindor common room, James ducked around the edge of the room, avoiding the eyes of those gathered there, laughing with their friends, listening to music, discussing homework, snogging on the couch. He ducked up the stairs and into the sleeping chamber, which was dark and quiet. Back in his dad's day, the dorms had been separated by year. Now James was glad that he shared the room with some of the older years. They usually brought reassurance that all of this was survivable. He needed some of that reassurance now, or at least someone to notice his misery and validate it. He sighed deeply in the empty room.

James washed up in the little bathroom, changed, then sat on his bed, looking out into the night. Nobby watched him from his cage by the window, clicking his beak from time to time, wanting to get outside and find a mouse or two, but James didn't notice him. The rain had finally exhausted itself. The clouds were breaking up, revealing a great silvery moon. James watched it for a long time, not knowing what he was waiting for, not even really knowing he was waiting. In the end, what he was waiting for didn't happen. No one came upstairs. He heard their voices below. It was Friday night. Nobody else was going to bed early. He felt utterly lonely and bereft. He slid under the covers and stared out at the moon from there.

Eventually, he slept.



James spent most of his weekend moping about in the Gryffindor Common room. He knew that neither Ralph nor Zane could get into the common room without the password, and he was in no mood to see them or anyone else. He read his assigned homework chapters and practiced some wandwork. He was particularly annoyed to discover that he couldn't get his practice feather to do any more than scuttle pathetically around the table. After twenty minutes, he grew exasperated, growled a word his mother didn't know he knew, and slammed his wand onto the table. It shot a stream of purple sparks, as if surprised at James' outburst.

Saturday night's detention with Argus Filch came. James found himself following Filch around the corridors with a bucket and a giant, stiff-bristled scrubbing brush. Occasionally, Filch would stop and, without turning, point at a spot on the floor, the wall, or a detail of a statue. James would look and there would be a bit of graffiti or a patch of long trodden-upon gum. James would sigh, dip the brush, and begin to scrub with both hands. Filch treated James as if he was personally responsible for each bit of defacing he scrubbed. As James worked, Filch muttered and fumed, lamenting about the much better sorts of punishments he had been permitted to mete out in years past. By the time James was allowed to return to his rooms, his fingers were cold, red and sore, and smelled of Filch's ugly brown soap.

On Sunday afternoon, James went for a moody wander around the grounds and ran into Ted and Petra, who were lounging on a blanket, ostensibly working out star charts on sheets of parchment.

"Now that Trelawney's sharing Divination class with Madame Delacroix, we have actual homework," Ted complained. "Used to be we just had to look at some tea leaves and make up doom and gloom predictions. That was kind of fun, actually."

Petra was leaning against a tree, shuffling maps and charts on her lap, comparing them to a huge book of constellations that lay open on the blanket. "Unlike Trelawney, Delacroix seems to have the quaint notion that astrology is a hard science," she said, shaking her head in disgust. "How a bunch of rocks rolling around in space know anything about my future is beyond me."

Ted told James to stick around and keep them from getting too much done. Sensing that he wasn't interrupting anything personal, and that neither Ted nor Petra were going to bring up James' disastrous Quidditch tryouts, James flopped onto the blanket and peered at the book of star charts. Black and white drawings of planets, each emblazoned with names and illustrations of mythical creatures, circled and spun slowly on the pages, their orbits drawn as red ellipses.

"Which one of these planets is the Wocket from?" James asked drily.

Petra turned a page. "Hardy-har."

James turned the enormous pages of the constellation book slowly, examining the moving planets and other-worldly astrological symbols. "So how do Professor Trelawney and Madame Delacroix get along,

then?” James asked after a minute. He remembered Damien implying there would be some friction between them.

“Oil and water,” Ted replied. “Trelawney tries to make nice, but she obviously hates the voodoo queen. For Delacroix’s part, she doesn’t even pretend to like Trelawney. They’re from two different schools of thought, in every sense of the word.”

“I like Trelawney’s school better,” Petra muttered, scribbling a note on her parchment.

“We all know what you think, dear,” Ted soothed. He turned to James. “Petra likes Trelawney because she knows that, at its heart, divination is really just a set of random variables that you use to order your own thinking. Trelawney thinks it’s all mystical, of course, but she still knows it’s just a bunch of totally subjective mumbo-jumbo. Petra is a facts girl, so she likes that even if Trelawney takes all this stuff seriously, she doesn’t try to make it, you know, rigid.”

Petra sighed and clapped her book shut. “Divination isn’t science. It’s psychology. At least Trelawney gets that in practice, if not in belief. Delacroix...” She threw the book onto the pile next to her, rolling her eyes.

“We have a test this week,” Ted said mournfully. “An actual Divination test. It’s all about some crazy astrological event that’s happening later this year. The linings of the planets or whatever.”

James looked quizzical, “The linings of the planets?”

“*Alignment* of the planets,” Petra said patiently. “Actually, it is a pretty big deal. It only happens once every few hundred years. *That’s* science. Knowing what silly mythical creature each planet represents, what it was a god of to some bunch of dotty primitives, and what it means to ‘the harmonics of the astrological precognition matrix’ isn’t.”

Ted looked at James and frowned. “Someday, we’ll get Petra to reveal her true feelings about it.”

Petra smacked him over the head with one of the larger star charts.

Later, at dinner, James saw Zane and Ralph sitting together at the Ravenclaw table. He saw Zane look over once, and was glad that he didn’t try to come over and talk to him. He knew it was extremely petty of him, but he was still sick with jealousy and the shame of his embarrassment. He ate quickly, and then wandered out of the Great Hall, unsure where he would go.

The evening was pleasant and cool as the sun dipped behind the mountains. James explored the perimeter of the grounds, listening to the song of the crickets and throwing stones into the lake. He went to knock on the door to Hagrid’s cabin, but there was a note on the door, written in large, clumsy letters. The note said that Hagrid was up in the forest until Monday morning. Spending time with Grawp and Grawp’s lady giant friend, James figured. It was beginning to get dark. James turned and headed dejectedly back in the direction of the castle.

He was on his way up to the common room when he decided to make a side trip. He was curious about something.

The trophy case was lit with a series of lanterns, so that the cups, plaques, and statues each glinted brightly. James walked slowly along, looking in at the team photos of decades-past Quidditch teams, their uniforms outdated, but their smiles and expressions of hearty invincibility eternally unchanged. There were gold and bronze trophies, antique Snitches, game Bludgers strapped down with leather belts, but still wiggling slightly as he passed.

James stopped near the end and looked in at the Triwizard Tournament display. His dad smiled the same uncomfortable smile, looking impossibly young and unruly. James leaned in and looked at the picture on the other side of the Triwizard Cup, the one of Cedric Diggory. The boy in the picture was handsome, guileless, with the same expression on his face that James had seen in the old Quidditch team photos, that expression of perpetual youth and seamless confidence. James studied the photo. The expression was what had kept him from making the connection the first time he'd seen the picture.

“It was you, wasn't it,” James whispered to the picture. It wasn't really a question.

The boy in the picture smiled his smile, nodding slightly, as if in agreement.

James hadn't expected an answer, but as he started to straighten up, something changed on the plaque below the Triwizard Cup. The engraved words sank into the silver plaque, then, after a moment, new words surfaced. They spelled out slowly, silently.

James Potter

Harry's son

A shiver thrilled down James' back. He nodded. “Yes,” he whispered.

The words sank back into nothing. Several seconds went by, and then more words drifted up.

How long

Has it been

James didn't understand the question at first. He shook his head slightly. “I... I'm sorry. How long has it been since what?”

The letters receded and spelled again, slowly, as if they took great effort.

Since I died

James swallowed. “I don't know, exactly. Seventeen or eighteen years, I think.”

The letters faded out very slowly. No more formed for almost a minute. Then:

Time is so strange here

It feels longer

Shorter

James didn't know what to say. A sense of great loneliness and sadness had crept into the corridor, filling the space, and James himself, like a cool cloud.

"My--" James' voice caught. He cleared his throat, swallowed, and tried again. "My dad and mum, Ginny, used to be Weasley... they talk about you. Sometimes. They... they remember you. They liked you."

The letters faded, surfaced.

Ginny and Harry

I always knew

There was something there

Cedric's ghost seemed to be seeping away, leaking out of the air of the corridor. The letters faded slowly. James had wanted to ask more questions, had meant to ask about the Muggle intruder, how he was getting in, but now it seemed unimportant. He just wanted to say something to lessen the pall of sadness he'd sensed in Cedric's presence, but he couldn't think of anything. Then the letters came once more, spelling out very faintly and slowly.

Are they happy

James read the question, considered it. He nodded. "Yeah, Cedric. They are. *We* are."

The letters evaporated as soon as James spoke, and there was something like a sigh all around him, long and somehow exhausted. When it was over, James glanced around the corridor. He could tell he was alone again. When he looked back at the plaque below the Triwizard Cup, it had reverted to its normal state, covered in elaborate, engraved words. James shivered, hugged himself, then turned and began to walk back toward the main hall. The ghost had finally spoken, and it was Cedric Diggory.

We are happy, James thought. As he climbed the steps to the common room, he realized it was true. He felt a little silly about the way he'd mooned around all weekend, stirring his jealousy and sense of failure like a stew. At this moment, it all seemed unimportant. He was just glad to be here, at Hogwarts, with new friends, challenges, endless adventures before him. He ran along the hallway to the portrait hole, wanting nothing more at that moment than to spend the last couple of hours of his first weekend at Hogwarts having some fun, laughing, forgetting the silliness of the whole Quidditch disaster. He realized, reluctantly, that on some level, it was even a little funny.

As he entered the common room, he stopped and looked around. Ralph and Zane were there, sitting with the rest of the Gremlins around the table by the window. They all looked up.

“There’s our little alien,” Zane said happily. “We’re trying to work your broom-handling skills into the routine. What do you think of a Roswell crash kinda gig? Ralph’s got his wand all ready to catch you.”

Ralph wiggled his wand and smiled sheepishly. James rolled his eyes and went to join them.



James awoke late Monday morning. He ran into the Great Hall hoping to grab a piece of toast before Transfiguration class and met Ralph and Zane, who were just coming out.

“No time, mate,” Ralph said, hooking James’ arm and turning him around. “Can’t be late to first class. McGonagall teaches it and I’ve heard bad, bad things about what she does to tardy students.”

James sighed and trotted along with them through the noisy, busy corridors. “I hope she doesn’t do terrible things to students whose stomachs growl during class as well.”

Zane handed something to James as they walked. “Check that out when you get a chance. I already showed it to Ralphie and it blew his mind, didn’t it? I’ve marked the spot for you.” It was a thick, bedraggled book. The cover was clothbound in frayed fabric that had once probably been red. The pages were yellowed, threatening to fall out of the binding in chunks.

“What is it?” James said, unable to read the embossed title, which was ghostly faint with age. “Between Jackson and Flitwick, I’ve got enough reading to last me until next term.”

“You’ll be interested in this, believe me. It’s the *Book of Parallel Histories, Volume Seven*,” Zane said. “I got it from the Ravenclaw library. Just read the section I marked.”

“Ravenclaw has a private library?” Ralph asked, struggling to wrestle his Transfiguration textbook out of his overstuffed backpack.

“Do you Slytherins have dragons’ heads on your walls?” Zane shrugged. “Sure. To each his own.”

As they filed toward the Transfiguration classroom, they passed through a cluster of students standing beside the door. Several of them wore the blue ‘Question the Victors’ badges. More and more students seemed to be wearing them as the days went by. Signs on some of the bulletin boards had identified the badges as the mark of a club called the ‘Progressive Element’. James was dismayed to see that not all of the students wearing them were Slytherins.

“Your dad’s coming today, eh, Potter?” an older boy called out, smiling crookedly. “Going to have a little meeting with his cronies from the States?”

James stopped and looked at the speaker. “He’s coming today, yeah,” he said, his cheeks going red. “But I don’t know what you mean about his ‘cronies’. He hasn’t even met the Americans before. Maybe you should read a little before you open your mouth.”

“Oh, we’ve been reading, believe me,” the boy replied, his smile disappearing. “More than you and your father would like us to be, I’m sure. *Your* kind can’t hide the truth forever.”

“Hide the truth?” James said, anger overcoming his caution. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Read the badges, Potter. You know exactly what we’re talking about,” the boy said, hoisting his backpack and moving casually down the hall with his friends. “And if you don’t, you’re even stupider than you look.” He turned his back on James.

James blinked in anger and amazement. “What was that all about?”

Ralph sighed. “Come on, let’s get a seat. I’ll tell you, although I don’t understand much of it myself.”

But they had no time to discuss it before class. Headmistress McGonagall, who had taught Transfiguration to James’ mum and dad, taught it still, and with apparently the same degree of businesslike briskness. She explained the basic wand motions and commands, illustrating by transforming a book into a herring sandwich. She even asked one of the students, a boy named Carson, to eat a portion of the sandwich. Afterward, she transformed the sandwich back into the book and showed the class that the book still bore the bite marks Carson had made. There were sounds of awe and amusement. Carson looked at the bitten chunks and pressed his hand to his stomach, a look of thoughtful dismay on his face. Near the end of class, McGonagall instructed the students to produce their wands and practice the motions and commands on a banana, which they were to attempt to transfigure into a peach.

“*Persica Alteramus*, emphasis on first syllables only. Don’t expect to make much progress your first time,” she called over the noise of the students’ attempts. “If you produce even a banana with a hint of peach fuzz, we will consider that a success for today. Do be careful, Miss Majaris! Small circular flicks only, please!”

Zane stared furiously at his banana and flicked his wand at it. “*Persica Alteramus!*” There was no apparent change. He pressed his lips together. “Let’s see you try, James.”

Shrugging, James raised his wand and flicked it, speaking the command. The banana flopped over, but remained decidedly a banana.

“Maybe they’re transforming on the inside,” Zane said hopefully. “Maybe we should peel it and see if it’s all peachy in there, eh?”

James thought about it, and then shook his head. They both tried again. Ralph watched. “More wrist movement. You guys look like you’re directing jetliners.”

“So easy to criticize, so hard to create,” Zane said between attempts. “Let’s see you have a go, Ralphinator.”

Ralph seemed reluctant to try. He fingered his wand, keeping it under the edge of the desk.

“Come on, Ralph,” James said. “You’ve been pretty excellent at wandwork so far. What are you worried about?”

“Nothing,” Ralph said, a little defensively. “I don’t know.”

“Rats!” Zane said, dropping his wand arm and grabbing the banana with the other. He plunked his wand onto the table and pointed the banana at it. “Maybe I’d have better luck doing it this way, you think?”

James and Ralph stared at him. He rolled his eyes. “Oh, sheesh, come on Ralph. Make with the peach. You know you can do it. What are you waiting for?”

Ralph grimaced, then sighed and raised his gigantic wand. He flicked it lightly at his banana and said the command flatly, almost as if he was trying to get it wrong. There was a flash and a noise like a pine knot exploding in a fireplace. The rest of the class heard the noise and glanced over at Ralph. A puff of heavy smoke lingered on the table in front of Ralph, who had pushed back from it, his eyes wide and troubled. As the smoke dissipated, James leaned in. Ralph’s banana was still lying there, completely untouched.

“Well,” Zane said into the sudden silence, “that was a whole lotta--”

A small, squishy noise came from Ralph’s banana. The peel split slowly and began to separate, opening like a pulpy yellow flower. There was a prolonged gasp from the students as a green tendril grew out of the center of the peeling banana. It seemed to sniff the air as it grew, twisting and lengthening like a vine. The tendril began to straighten as it rose, snaking up from the table with a graceful, writhing motion. More tendrils came out of the banana. They spread along the surface in a starburst pattern, found the edges of the table, and curled under them, gripping tightly. Branches began to separate from the main shoot as it grew, thickening and turning lighter, until it was a woody, yellowish grey. Foliage sprouted from the branches in great, sudden bursts, growing from tender shoots to full leaf in a matter of seconds. Finally, as the tree reached a height of about four feet, there came a series of soft pops. Half a dozen peaches sprouted from the ends of the lower branches, weighing them down. Each one was fuzzy, plump, and pristine.

James tore his glance away from the tree and looked around the room. Every eye was on the perfect little peach tree Ralph had conjured, mouths dropped open, wand hands still frozen in mid-flick. Headmistress McGonagall stared at the tree intently, her mouth a frown of complete surprise. Then motion returned to the room. Everyone exhaled and spontaneous, awed applause broke out.

“He’s mine!” Zane called, standing and throwing an arm around Ralph’s shoulders. “I saw him first!” Ralph broke his eyes away from the tree, looked at Zane and smiled rather blankly. But James remembered the look on Ralph’s face when the tree was growing. He hadn’t been smiling then.

Moments later, in the corridor outside, Zane spoke through a mouthful of peach. “Seriously, Ralph. You’re creeping me out a bit, here. That’s some serious wizarding you’ve got going on. What’s the deal?”

Ralph smiled his uncertain, worried smile again. “Well, actually…”

James looked at Ralph. “What? Tell, Ralph!”

“All right,” he said, stopping and pulling them into a windowed alcove. “But this is just a guess, right?”

James and Zane nodded enthusiastically, gesturing for Ralph to go on.

“I’ve been practicing a lot with some of the other Slytherins at night, you know,” Ralph explained. “Just the basic stuff. They’ve been teaching me a few things. Disarming Spells and some tricks and pranks, stuff to pull on your enemies.”

“What enemies have you got already, Ralph?” Zane asked incredulously, licking peach juice from his fingers.

Ralph flapped his hand impatiently. “You know, just average enemies. It’s just the way the guys in my house talk. Anyway, they say I’m better than average. They think I’m not really just a plain old Muggle kid who got some random magic genes. They think maybe one of my parents is from one of the great wizarding families and just don’t know it.”

“Seems like a pretty big thing not to know, doesn’t it?” James said doubtfully. “I mean, you said your dad made Muggle computer stuff, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah, him,” Ralph said dismissively, and then dropped his voice. “But my mum… I didn’t tell you guys she was dead, did I? No,” he answered himself. “Of course not. Well, she is. She died when I was really little. I never even knew her. What if she was a witch? I mean, what if she was from one of the great old pureblood wizarding families and my dad never even knew it? It happens, you know. Magic types fall in love with Muggles and can never tell them the secret their whole lives. Pureblood types don’t like it, I guess, but still…” He trailed off and looked back and forth at Zane and James.

“Well,” James said slowly, “sure. I guess it’s possible. Stranger things have happened.”

Zane raised his eyebrows, considering. “Would explain a lot, wouldn’t it? Maybe you’re, like, a prince or something. Maybe you’re an heir to fabulous riches and power and stuff?”

Ralph grimaced and stepped out of the alcove. “Let’s not get carried away. It’s just a guess, like I said.”

James walked with Zane and Ralph until it was time for his next class. Neither of the other two had Herbology class with him, so he told them he’d see them that afternoon and struck off across the grounds toward the greenhouses.

Professor Longbottom greeted James by name as he entered, smiling warmly. James had always liked Neville, even though he was much quieter and thoughtful than his dad or Uncle Ron. James knew the stories of how Neville had fought back during his last year of school, when Voldemort had taken over the Ministry and Hogwarts had been under his control. In the end, Neville had been the one to cut off the head of the great snake, Nagini, Voldemort’s last link to immortality. Still, it was hard to imagine the gaunt and rather clumsy professor doing such things as he arranged pots and planters on the table at the front of the greenhouse classroom.

“Herbology is--” Neville began, gesturing and knocking over one of the smaller pots. He interrupted himself, righting the pot quickly, spilling dirt onto his papers. He looked up and smiled in a harried sort of way. “Herbology is the study of... well, herbs, of course. As you can see.” He nodded to the greenhouse at large, which was packed with hundreds of plants and trees, all growing in a bewildering variety of containers. James thought Professor Longbottom would probably be quite interested in examining the peach tree currently growing on the Transfiguration room table.

“Herbs are the root, er, so to speak, of much of the most fundamental practices of magic. Potions, medicine, wand construction, even many charms, all rely on the essential cultivation and processing of magical plants. In this class, we will be studying the many uses of some of our most important vegetable resources, from the lowly *bubotuber* to the rare *Mimulus mibletonia*.”

Out of the corner of James’ eye, he saw something moving. A plant was spreading a vine along a windowsill next to a first-year girl, who was furiously scribbling the names Neville was listing off. The vine separated from the windowsill, tapped lightly along her back, then curled into her earring. The girl’s eyes widened and she dropped her quill as the vine began to pull.

“Ow! Ow, ow, ow!” she cried, scrambling sideways off her chair and clapping a hand to her ear. Neville looked around, saw the girl and came bounding towards her.

“Yes, grab the vine, Miss Patonia! That’s right.” He reached her and began to carefully extract the vine from her earring. It twisted slowly as he pried it loose. “You’ve discovered our *Larcenous ligulous*, or rather, it has discovered you. I apologize for not warning you before you sat down. Bred by pirates several hundred years ago because of its innate attraction to sparkly objects, which it uses to magnify sunlight for photosynthetic purposes. Nearly extinct, after having been systematically hunted and burned during the

Purges.” Neville found the base of the plant and wrapped the vine methodically around it, pinning its tip into the dirt with a diamond topped hoop. Patonia rubbed her ear and stared at the vine as if she’d like to do some burning of her own.

Neville returned to the front table and began talking the class through the long line of potted plants he’d arranged there. James yawned. The heat of the greenhouse was making him rather drowsy. In an attempt to stay awake, James reached to get his parchment and quill from his backpack. His hand bumped the book Zane had given him. He pulled it out, along with his parchments, and cradled it in his lap. When he was sure Neville had descended deep enough into talking about his favorite subject not to notice, James opened the book to where Zane had marked it. His interest was immediately piqued by the heading at the top of the page: *Feodre Austramaddux*. He leaned over the book and read quickly.

Proponent of Reverse Precognition, or the art of recording history through counter-chronological divination, the Seer and historian Austramaddux remains known to modern wizardry mainly for his fantastic accounts of the last days of Merlinus Ambrosius, legendary sorcerer and founder of the Order of Merlin. Austramaddux’s account, which is recorded in its entirety in his famous *Inverse Historie of the Magickal Worlde* (see chapter twelve) deals with his acquaintance with Merlinus at the end of the latter’s career as special magical regent to the kings of Europe. Having grown disenchanted with the corruption of the magical world as it became ‘infected’ by influences from the growing non-magical kingdoms, Merlinus announced his plan to ‘quit the earthly realm’. Further, he claimed he would return to the society of men, centuries or even millennia later, when the balance between the magical and non-magical worlds was more, as Austramaddux put it, ‘ripe for his ministrations’. These predictions have been the source of many plots and conspiracies in the centuries since, usually led by those of a revolutionary bent, who believe that the return of Merlinus would facilitate their plans to overcome and subjugate the non-magical world via politics or outright war.

James stopped reading. His mind was racing as he considered the implications of what he’d just read. He’d known of Merlin his whole life, in much the same way that Muggle children knew about Saint Nicholas: not as a historical figure, but as a sort of mythical cartoon character. It had never occurred to James to doubt that Merlin had been a real person, but it had also never occurred to him to wonder what kind of a man Merlin might have been. His only references were silly sayings he’d grown up with, like ‘by Merlin’s beard’ or ‘what in the name of Merlin’s pants’, none of which implied much about the character of the great sorcerer. According to Austramaddux, Merlin had been a sort of magical advisor to Muggle kings and leaders. Was it possible that, in Merlin’s time, witches and wizards lived openly in the Muggle world, with no laws of secrecy, no hiding, no Disillusionment Charms? And if so, what did Merlin mean by saying the wizarding world had been ‘infected’ by the Muggles? Even more, what had he meant by the creepy prediction that he’d return when the world was ‘ripe for his ministrations’? It was no wonder that dark wizards through history had tried to make Merlin’s prediction come true, to bring the great sorcerer back into the world somehow.

Dark wizards had always sought to rule the Muggle world, and apparently, there was some basis to believe that Merlin, the greatest and most powerful wizard of all time, would help them bring that about.

A sudden thought occurred to James, and his eyes widened. He had first heard the name Austramaddux via a profile created by a Slytherin. Slytherin had always been the house of dark wizards intent on domination of the Muggle world. What if the enigmatic mention of Austramaddux wasn't just a meaningless coincidence? What if it was a sign of a new dark plot? What if the Slytherin who had made that profile was part of a plot to facilitate the predicted return of Merlinus Ambrosius, who would lead a final war against the Muggle world?

James closed the book slowly and gritted his teeth. Somehow, the moment he thought of it, it seemed completely true. That explained why a Slytherin would use a name that even his Head of House thought was a joke. The Slytherin knew it wasn't, and would soon be victorious in a plot that would prove it. James' heart pounded as he sat and thought furiously. Who could he tell? Zane and Ralph, of course. They might have already thought of it. His dad? James decided that he couldn't. Not yet, at least. James was old enough to know that most adults wouldn't believe such a story from a kid even if the kid could provide pictures that proved it.

James didn't know exactly what he could do to stop such a plot, but he knew what he had to do next. He had to find out which Slytherin it was that had taken Ralph's GameDeck. He had to find the Slytherin that used the name Austramaddux.

With that in mind, James bolted from the greenhouse as soon as class was over, forgetting entirely that tonight was the night his dad, Harry Potter, was arriving for his meeting with the Americans.



As James ran across the grounds, he became aware of the noise of a crowd. He slowed, listening. Shouts and chants mingled with the babble of raucous, excited voices. As he turned the corner into the courtyard, the noise became much louder. A mob of students roiled around the courtyard, gathering from all directions even as James watched. Most were simply curious to see what the commotion was about, but there was a very active group in the center, marching, chanting slogans, some holding large, hand-painted signs and banners. James saw one of the banners as he approached crowd, and his heart sank. It read 'End Ministry Auror Fascism'. Another sign waved and poked at the sky: 'Tell the TRUTH, Harry Potter!'

James circled around the group, trying to stay inconspicuous. Near the steps of the main hall, Tabitha Corsica was being interviewed by a woman with garish purple cat's-eye glasses and an overly-attentive expression. With growing unease, James recognized her as Rita Skeeter, lead investigative reporter for the *Daily Prophet*, and one of his dad's least favorite people.

As he passed, Tabitha glanced sideways at him and made a slight shrug and smile, as if to say *so sorry about this, but these are hard times and we all do what we must...*

Just as James was about to climb the steps into the main hall, the Headmistress appeared, striding purposefully into the sunlight with a very grim expression on her face. She placed her wand to her throat and spoke from the top step, her voice echoing all around the courtyard, cutting through the noise of the crowd.

"I won't ask what the meaning of this is, as I find it disappointingly obvious," she said sternly, and James, who had known Minerva McGonagall in a peripheral way for most of his life, thought he had never seen her so enraged. Her face was deathly pale, with livid red high on her cheeks. Her voice, still ringing around the courtyard, was controlled but steely with conviction. "Far be it from me to disabuse you of the right to maintain whatever ill-founded and preposterous notions many of you might have picked up, but let me assure you, regardless of what you might choose to believe, it is not the policy of this school to allow students to insult esteemed guests."

The signs sagged, but did not lower completely. James saw that Rita Skeeter was staring up at the Headmistress with a look of hungry excitement on her face, her Quick-Quotes Quill scribbling wildly on a pad of parchment. McGonagall sighed, gathering her composure. "There are proper avenues for expression of disagreement, as you all know. This... *display*... is neither necessary nor appropriate. I expect you all, therefore, to disperse immediately with the knowledge that you have most certainly..." she allowed her gaze to fall upon Rita Skeeter, "made your point."

"Madam Headmistress?" a voice called, and James didn't need to turn to know that it was Tabitha Corsica. There was a pregnant silence as the entire courtyard held its breath. James could hear Rita Skeeter's quill scratching avidly.

McGonagall paused, studying Tabitha meaningfully. "Yes, Miss Corsica?"

"I couldn't agree with you more, ma'am," Corsica said smoothly, her beautiful voice echoing around the courtyard. "And for my own part, I hope that we can all choose to pursue these issues in a more reasonable and relevant manner, as you suggest. Might it be too soon to propose that we make this the subject of the first All-School Topical Debate? That would allow us to approach this sensitive issue respectfully and thoroughly, in the manner I'm sure you'd agree it deserves."

McGonagall's jaw was like iron as she stared down at Corsica. The pause was so long that Tabitha actually looked away. She glanced around the courtyard, her composure faltering slightly. The Quick-Quotes Quill had caught up to the proceedings. It hovered over the parchment, waiting.

“I appreciate your suggestion, Miss Corsica,” McGonagall said flatly, “but this is neither the time nor the place for discussion of the debate team calendar, as you can surely imagine. And now,” she let her gaze sweep over the courtyard critically, “I consider the matter closed. Anyone who wishes to continue this discussion may do so much more comfortably in the privacy of their rooms. I’d advise you to be off now, before I send Mr. Filch out to take a census.”

The crowd began to break up. McGonagall saw James, and her expression changed. “Come along, Potter,” she said, beckoning impatiently. James climbed the steps and followed her back into the shadow of the Hall. McGonagall was muttering angrily, her tartan robes swishing as she stalked into a side corridor. She seemed to expect James to follow, so he did.

“Ridiculous rabble-rousing propagandists,” she fumed, still leading James into what he recognized as the staff offices. “James, I’m sorry you had to witness that. But I’m even sorrier that such an ugly bit of rumor-mongering has found a foothold within these walls.”

McGonagall turned and opened a door without breaking stride. James found himself entering a large room full of couches and chairs, small tables and bookshelves, all arranged haphazardly around an enormous marble fireplace. And there, standing to greet him with a crooked smile was his dad. James grinned and ran past McGonagall.

“James,” Harry Potter said delightedly, pulling the boy into a rough hug and ruffling his hair. “My boy. I’m so glad to see you, son. How’s school?”

James shrugged, smiling happily but feeling suddenly shy. There were several other people present he didn’t recognize, all of them looking at him as he stood with his father.

“You all know my boy, James,” Harry said, squeezing James’ shoulder. “James, these are some representatives from the Ministry who’ve come along with me. You remember Titus Hardcastle, don’t you? And this is Mr. Recreant and Miss Sacarhina. They both work for the Department of Ambassadorial Relations.”

James shook hands dutifully. He did remember Titus Hardcastle when he looked at him, although he hadn’t seen him for a long time. Hardcastle, one of his dad’s head Aurors, was squat and thick, with a square head and very tough, weathered features. Mr. Recreant was tall and thin, dressed rather fussily in pinstriped robes and a black derby. His handshake was quick and loose, rather like holding a dead starfish. Miss Sacarhina, however, didn’t shake hands. She smiled hugely at James and squatted down to his level, examining him up and down.

“I see so much of your parents in you, young man,” she said, tilting her head and affecting a conspiratorial manner. “Such promise and potential. I do hope you’ll be joining us for the evening.”

In answer, James looked up at his dad. Harry smiled and put both hands on James’ shoulders. “We’re having dinner tonight with the Alma Alerons. Do you want to come along? Apparently, we’re having

true American food, which could mean anything from hamburgers to, well, cheeseburgers, as far as I can guess.”

“Sure!” James said, smiling. Harry Potter smiled back and winked.

“But first,” he said, addressing the rest of the group, “we’ll be joining our friends from Alma Aleron for a look at some of their proprietary magic. We’re due to meet them in the next ten minutes, and I’ve asked a few others to join us as well. Shall we?”

“I’ll not be joining you, I’m afraid,” McGonagall said briskly. “It appears that I will need to be keeping a close tab on certain elements of the student populace during your tour, Mr. Potter. I apologize.”

“Understood, Minerva,” Harry said. It always sounded strange to James that his dad called the Headmistress by her first name, but she seemed to expect it from him. “Do what you have must, but don’t worry about squashing every little outburst. It’s hardly worth the effort.”

“I’m not sure I agree with you about that, Harry, but I expect I’d not be able to maintain perfect order regardless. I shall see you this evening, then.” With that, the Headmistress turned and left the room brusquely, still fuming.

“Shall we, then?” Miss Sacarhina inquired. The group began to move toward a door on the opposite side of the room. As they walked, Harry bent toward his son and whispered. “I’m glad you’ll be coming along tonight. Sacarhina and Recreant aren’t exactly the most pleasant travelling companions, but Percy insisted I bring them. I’m afraid this whole affair’s gone all political.”

James nodded wisely, not knowing what that meant, but happy to be invited into his dad’s confidence, as always. “So how’d you travel?”

“Floo Network,” Harry answered. “Didn’t want to make any more visible entry than necessary. Minerva warned us about the demonstration the P.E. types were planning.”

It took James a moment to realize his dad was talking about the Progressive Element. “She knows about those guys?” he asked, surprised.

His dad put a finger to his lips, nodding slightly toward Sacarhina and Recreant, who were ahead of them, talking in low voices as they walked. “Later,” Harry mouthed.

After a few turns, Mr. Recreant opened a large door and stepped out into sunlight, the rest following. They descended a broad stone stairway which led down to a grassy area bordered by the Forbidden Forest on one side and a low stone wall on the other. Neville Longbottom and Professor Slughorn were standing near the wall, talking. They both looked up as the group approached.

“Hi, Harry!” Neville said, grinning and coming forward to meet him. “Thanks for inviting me and Horace along for this. I’ve been curious about it ever since the Americans got here.”

“Harry Potter, as I live and breathe,” Slughorn said warmly, taking Harry’s hand in both of his. “Very good of you indeed to ask us to come. You know I’m always interested in new developments in the international magical community.”

Harry led the group to a gate in the stone wall. It opened onto a neat flagstone path that meandered toward the lake. “Don’t thank me, either of you. I only brought the both of you along so that you could ask all the smart questions and make sense of what they show us.”

Slughorn laughed indulgently, but Neville only smiled. James figured that his dad was probably telling at least part of the truth, and only Neville knew it.

The group approached a large canvas tent that was pitched on a low rise overlooking the water. An American flag hung limp on one of the tent’s poles, over a flag emblazoned with the Alma Aleron crest. A pair of American students stood talking nearby. One of the students saw the group and acknowledged them with a slight nod. He called toward the tent. “Professor Franklyn?”

After a moment, Franklyn emerged from the side of the tent, wiping his hands on a large cloth. “Ah! Greetings, visitors,” he said graciously. “Thank you so much for coming.”

Harry shook Franklyn’s outstretched hand. It was apparent that they had already met earlier and arranged this gathering. Harry turned and made introductions all around, finishing with James.

“Of course, of course,” Franklyn said, beaming at James. “Young Mr. Potter is in my class. How are you today, James?”

“Good, sir,” James answered, smiling.

“As you should be, on such a fine day,” Franklyn said seriously, nodding approvingly. “And now that the pleasantries have been seen to, do follow me, my friends. Harry, you were interested in seeing the means by which we care for our vehicles, is that right?”

“Very much so,” Harry said. “I wasn’t here to see your arrival, of course, but I heard all about your interesting flying vehicles. I am very eager to see them, as well as your storage facility. I have heard quite a lot of speculation about it, although I admit I understand very little of it.”

“Our Trans-Dimensional Garage, yes. Virtually none of us understands very much about it, I am afraid,” Franklyn said dubiously. “In fact, if it were not for our technomancy expert, Theodore Jackson, none of us would have the slightest idea how to maintain it. Speaking of whom, he sends his apologies for not being able to be here for the tour. He will be joining us this evening and will be happy to discuss it with you then, should you have any questions for him.”

“As I’m sure we will,” Titus Hardcastle said in his low, gravelly voice.

James followed his dad around to the open side of the tent and nearly tripped over his own feet when he looked inside. The tent was quite large, with complicated wooden struts and frameworks supporting it. All three of the Alma Aleron flying vehicles were parked inside it, leaving enough room for neat arrangements of tool chests, maintenance equipment, extra parts, and several men in work clothes who moved among the vehicles busily. The strangest thing about the tent, however, was that the back was missing. Where James was sure he should have seen the hanging canvas wall he had seen from the outside, there was simply open air, looking out onto a view that was definitely not any view of the Hogwarts grounds. Neat, red brick buildings and huge, horny trees could be seen in the distance beyond the tent's missing back wall. Even stranger, the lighting of the scene was completely different than the bright noon sunlight of the Hogwarts grounds. On the other side of the tent, the scene was lit with a pale pink light, the huge, fluffy clouds in the distance tinged with gold. The trees and grass seemed to sparkle, as if covered in morning dew. One of the workmen nodded at Franklyn, then turned and walked out into the strange scene, brushing his hands on his overalls.

"Welcome to one of the worlds few trans-dimensional structures," Franklyn said, gesturing proudly. "Our Garage, which simultaneously stands both here, in temporary residence on the grounds of Hogwarts castle, and in its permanent location in the east quadrangle of Alma Aleron University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States."

"Great Ghost of Golgamethe," Slughorn said, stepping forward slowly. "I've read of such things, but never thought I'd live to see one. Is this a naturally occurring temporal anomaly? Or is this orchestrated via Quantum Transference Charms?"

"*That's* why I invited you, Professor," Harry said, smiling and examining the interior of the tent.

"The former," Franklyn said, stepping between the Dodge Hornet and the Volkswagen Beetle to make room for the group. "This is one of only three known dimensional plurality bubbles. What that means, I am told, is that this tent exists within a dimensional bridge, allowing it to span two places simultaneously. Thus, we can see on one side the noontime grounds of Hogwarts," he gestured out the open side of the tent through which they had entered, "what you might think of as *our* side of the trans-dimensional bubble. And on the other side," he spread a hand toward the dim landscape seen magically through the rear of the tent, "the dawn-time quadrangle of Alma Aleron University, the other side of the bubble. Meet Mr. Peter Graham, our head mechanic."

A man straightened up from the open hood of the Stutz Dragonfly. He smiled and waved. "Good to meet you lady and gentlemen. So to speak."

"Likewise," Neville, who was closest, said a bit faintly.

"Mr. Graham and his men are all in the American half of the bubble," Franklyn explained. "Seeing as they are specifically trained to work on our fleet, we find it best to let them handle the care and maintenance even while we travel. As you may guess, however, they are not, technically, here." To illustrate, Franklyn reached toward one of the workmen who was squatted near the Hornet. Franklyn's hand swept through the man as if he were smoke. The man seemed not to have noticed.

“So,” Harry said, frowning slightly, “they can hear us, and see us, and we can see and hear them as well, but they are still there, in America, and we are still here, at Hogwarts. Therefore, we cannot touch them?”

“Precisely,” Franklyn said.

James spoke up. “Then how is it we can touch the cars and so can your mechanics in the States?”

“Excellent question, my boy,” Slughorn said, patting James on the back.

“It is indeed,” Franklyn agreed. “And that is where things get a bit, er, quantum. The simple answer is that these cars, unlike us, are multi-dimensional. You’ve all heard, I expect, the theory that there are more dimensions beyond the four we are familiar with, yes?”

There were nods. James hadn’t heard of any such theory, but he thought he understood the idea nonetheless.

Franklyn went on. “The theory states that there are extra dimensions, unknowable by any of our senses, but just as real. Effectively, Professor Jackson has created a spell that enables these vehicles to tap into those dimensions, allowing them to exist simultaneously in two places anytime they are inside the walls of this Garage. While they are parked here, they cross the dimensional bubble and exist in both places at once.”

“Remarkable,” Slughorn said, running his hand along the fender of the Hornet. “So, effectively, your crew can service the vehicles regardless of where they travel, and you are afforded a view of home, even if you cannot access it.”

“Very true,” agreed Franklyn. “It is indeed both a great convenience and a touch of comfort.”

Neville was interested in the cars themselves. “Are they actual mechanized creatures or are they charmed machines?”

James lost interest as Franklyn launched into a detailed explanation of the winged cars. Walking over to the other side of the tent, he looked out into the grounds of the American school. The sun had just peeked over the roof of the red brick building nearby, casting its rose-colored light onto a clock tower. It was just after six in the morning there. How utterly strange and wonderful, James thought. Tentatively, he reached out his hand, curious to see if he could feel the coolness of the morning air in that other place. He felt a strange, numbing feeling in his fingertips, and then they brushed unseen canvas. Sure enough, he couldn’t pass through or even feel the air of the place.

“Too bad you can’t come on over, friend,” a voice said. James looked up. The head mechanic was leaning against the fender of the Beetle, smiling. “It’s almost breakfast and today’s mushroom omelet day.”

James grinned. “Sounds good. It’s lunchtime, here.”

“Professor Franklyn,” James heard Mr. Recreant’s voice say rather loudly, “how does this, er, structure comply with the International Magical Coalition’s ban on unproven or dark magic? Being virtually one of a kind, it would seem difficult to establish much of a safety record.”

“Ah, too true,” Franklyn agreed, looking steadily at Mr. Recreant. “We have been fortunate enough not to have experienced any problems so far, thus we have gone more or less unnoticed by the Coalition. In any case, it would be difficult to prove the threat of any danger. Even a total failure of Professor Jackson’s trans-dimensional spellwork would mean, at worst, that we’d have to take a taxi home instead of our beloved cars.”

“Excuse me,” Miss Sacarhina interjected, affecting a rather plastic smile. “A what?”

“I’m sorry, Miss,” Franklyn said. “A cab. A rented Muggle vehicle. I was being somewhat ridiculous, of course.”

Sacarhina cinched her smile a notch tighter. “Ah. Yes, of course. I tend to forget the American wizard’s fascination with Muggle machinery. I cannot imagine how it slipped my notice.”

Franklyn seemed oblivious to her sarcasm. “Well, I won’t speak for my compatriots, but I admit I do enjoy tinkering. Part of my appreciation for the Garage is that it allows me to oversee the maintenance of my fleet. I never get tired of figuring out how things work, and trying to make them work just a little bit better.”

“Mm-hmm,” Sacarhina nodded primly, glancing around at the cars.

One of the mechanics touched a wire under the hood of the Stutz Dragonfly and there was a spurt of blue sparks. With a squeak and a jerk, the long wings of the car unfolded, beating the air several times before screeching to a halt again. Neville had had to duck backward to avoid being pummeled by them.

“Good reflexes, Neville,” Harry said. “That was almost a case of ‘fly swats man’.”

Neville glanced at Harry and saw the suppressed smile. Hardcastle cleared his throat. “We should be moving along, ma’am, gentlemen.”

“Of course,” Harry agreed. “Mr. Franklyn.”

Franklyn raised a hand. “I insist you call me Ben. I’m three hundred years old, give or take, and being called ‘mister’ just reminds me of that. Will you indulge me?”

Harry grinned. “Of course, Ben. I look forward to seeing you at dinner tonight. Thank you very much for showing us your remarkable Garage.”

“A pleasure,” Franklyn said, beaming proudly. “I’ve got a very interesting thought-powered printing press back home I’d love to show you when you come to visit us in the States. I’d even show you the bell I helped cast back during the birth of our country, but the blasted thing’s broken and they won’t let me fix it.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Graham, the mechanic, called after them. “Or he’ll have you believing he forged the copper for the Statue of Liberty.” There was laughter from the rest of the crew.

Franklyn grimaced, and then waved Harry and the group on. “Tonight, my friends. Bring your appetite. And perhaps a competent Freezing Charm. I understand that Madame Delacroix is overseeing the gumbo.”



6. HARRY'S MIDNIGHT MEETING

James hurried back to the Gryffindor common room after classes, shrugging out of his school robes as he ran up the steps. He changed into a jacket and an evening cloak, matted his hair down with water from the basin, frowned critically at himself in the mirror, and then ran back down the steps two at a time to meet his dad.

Harry was waiting with Neville by the portrait of Sir Cadogan.

“A spirited tussle it was,” Cadogan was saying, leaning nonchalantly against the frame of his painting and waving his sword illustratively. He was talking to Neville, who looked extremely uncomfortable. “I saw the whole thing of course. Took place right there. Bollox Humphreys was his name, and he fought like a man possessed. Lost, of course, but noble as a thousand kings. Spilt most of his innards right where you’re standing and still swung his sword with more strength than a mountain troll. Gallant man. Gallant!”

“Ah, James, here we are,” Neville said loudly as James approached. Harry and Sir Cadogan looked up. Harry smiled, looking his son up and down.

“Your mum will be glad to know you’re putting that cloak to use.”

“To be honest, this is the first I’ve had it out of the trunk,” James admitted, grinning sheepishly.

Harry nodded, "And it'll go right back into the trunk after tonight, won't it?"

"Guaranteed."

"Good man," Harry acknowledged. James fell into step next to his dad as they headed toward a staircase.

"Wait!" Cadogan cried, sheathing his sword and jumping into the center of his frame. "Have I ever told you about the Battle of the Red Mages? Bloodiest massacre these walls have ever seen! Happened just at the foot of those stairs! Next time, then. Courage!"

"Who's that?" James asked, looking back over his shoulder.

"You'll get to know him," Neville said. "Enjoy your ignorance while you can."

As they walked, James listened as his dad told Neville about the current happenings at the Ministry. There had been an arrest of several individuals involved in a counterfeit Portkey operation. More trolls were being seen in the foothills, and the Ministry was stepping up patrols to keep the troublesome idiots from venturing into Muggle territories. The new Minister, Loquacious Knapp, was preparing to give a speech on expanded trade with Asian wizarding communities, including lifting the ban on flying carpets and something called 'shades'.

"In other words," Harry said, sighing, "things are more or less the way they always are. Little breakouts here and there, small conspiracies and squabbles. Politics and paperwork."

"What you mean," Neville said, smiling crookedly, "is that peace can be a pretty boring thing for an Auror."

Harry grinned. "I guess you're right. I should be thankful my job isn't any more interesting, shouldn't I? At least I get to spend most nights at home with Ginny, Lil, and Albus." He glanced down at James. "And take on an ambassador's assignment that just happens to afford me the chance to see my boy during his first week at Hogwarts."

"I understand he's only been to McGonagall's office once so far," Neville commented mildly.

"Oh?" Harry said, still eyeing James. "And what for?"

Neville raised his eyebrows at James as if to say *you have the floor*.

"I, er, broke a window."

Harry's smile hardened a bit around the edges. "I look forward to the story of how that happened," he said thoughtfully. James felt his dad's stare like it was a set of tiny weights.

They reached a double doorway with both doors thrown wide open. Delicious smells wafted down the hall.

“Here we are,” Neville said, standing aside to allow Harry and James to enter first. “The Americans’ quarters during their stay. We’ve given them most of the southwest turret. Had it temporarily refitted with a recreational area, common room, kitchen, and staff to suit their needs.”

“Sounds nice,” Harry said, examining the space. The common room was, in fact, rather small, with circular walls, high, rough-beamed ceilings, a cramped stone fireplace, and only two very tall, narrow windows. The Americans had, however, been very busy. There were bearskin rugs on the floors and tall, vibrantly colored tapestries hung on the walls, positioned over the stone staircase that spiraled the room. A three-story bookcase was crammed with gigantic volumes, most accessible only via a very rickety-looking wheeled ladder. The most amazing detail, however, was a mind-bogglingly complex armature of brass gears, joints, and mirrored lenses that hung from the ceiling, filling the upper chamber of the room and moving very slowly. James stared up into it, delighted and amazed. It made a very faint squeaking and clicking as it moved.

“You’ve discovered my Daylight Savings Device, my boy,” Ben Franklyn said, coming from a large arched doorway beneath the spiral staircase. “One of my absolute necessities whenever I travel for long periods, despite the fact that it’s a veritable bear to pack, and the calibrations when I set it up again are simply dreadful.”

“It’s wonderful,” Neville said, also staring up into the slowly ratcheting network of mirrors and wheels. “What does it do?”

“Let me demonstrate,” Franklyn said eagerly. “It works best in full daylight, of course, but even the stars and moon of a bright night can provide adequate light. An evening such as this should prove most satisfactory. Let me see...”

He moved to a battered high-backed leather chair, settled himself into it carefully, and then consulted a chart on the wall. “Third of September, yes. Moon is in the fourth house, it is, let me see... approximately a quarter past seven. Jupiter is approaching the final leg of... mm-hmm...”

As Franklyn muttered, he produced his wand and began pointing it at bits of the Device. Gears began to spin as parts of the Device whirred to life. Bits of the armature unfolded as other bits pivoted, making room. Mirrors began to slide, positioning behind cycling groups of lenses, which magnified them. Ratchets clicked and shuttled. The entire device seemed to dance slowly within itself as Franklyn directed it with his wand, apparently making calculations in his head as he went. And as it moved, something began to form within it. Ghostly beams of rose-colored light began to appear between the mirrors, pencil thin, turning motes of dust into tiny specks of fire. There were dozens of the beams, brightening, swiveling into place, and eventually forming a complicated geometric tracery. And then, in the center of the tracery, shapes shimmered into place. James turned on the spot, watching raptly as tiny planets coalesced, formed out of colored light. They spun and orbited, tracing faint arcs behind them. Two larger shapes condensed in the very center, and James recognized them as the sun and the moon. The sun was a ball of rose light, its corona spreading several feet around it. The moon, smaller but more solid, was like a silver Quaffle, equally divided between its light

and dark sides, turning slowly. The entire constellation weaved and turned majestically, dramatically lighting the brass Device and spilling delightful patterns of light over the entire room.

“Nothing so healthy as natural light,” Franklyn said. “Captured here, through the windows, and then condensed within a carefully calibrated network of mirrors and lenses, as you can see. The light is filtered with my own optical spellwork for clarity. The final result is, well, what you see here. Excellent for the eyesight, the blood, and one’s health overall, obviously.”

“This is the secret to your longevity?” Harry asked, rather breathlessly.

“Oh, certainly this is a small part of it,” Franklyn said dismissively. “Mostly, I just prefer it to read by at night. Certainly, it’s more fun than a torch.” He caught James eye and winked.

Professor Jackson appeared in the archway. James saw him glance from Franklyn to the light display overhead, a look of tired disdain on his face. “Dinner, I am told, is served. Shall we adjourn to the dining room or shall I have it brought in here?”

Along with Harry, James, Neville, and the representatives from the Ministry, most of the Hogwarts teaching staff was present, including Professor Curry. To James’ consternation, Curry told Harry all about James’ skills on the football field, assuring him that she would work to see that said skills were developed to their fullest extent.

Contrary to his dad’s suspicion, the meal was remarkably diverse and enjoyable. Madame Delacroix’s gumbo was the first course. She carried it to the table herself, somehow not spilling a drop despite her blindness. Even more curiously, she directed the ladle with her wand, a gnarled and evil-looking length of graperoot, dishing a portion into each bowl at the table while she stared at the ceiling and hummed rather disconcertingly. The gumbo was indeed spicy, thick with chunks of shrimp and sausage, but James liked it. Next came fresh rolls and several varieties of butter, including a brown and sticky goo that Jackson identified as apple butter. James tasted it carefully on a hunk of bread, and then spread a gigantic dollop on the remainder of his roll.

The main course was rack of lamb with mint jelly. James didn’t consider this typical American food, and commented as much.

“There’s no such thing as American food, James,” Jackson said. “Our cuisine, like our people, is simply the sum total of the various world cultures we come from.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Franklyn interjected. “I am pretty sure we can lay undisputed claim to the spicy buffalo wing.”

“Will we be having those tonight?” James asked hopefully.

“My apologies,” Franklyn said. “It is rather difficult to collect the ingredients for such things unless you possess Madame Delacroix’s unique voodoo capabilities.”

“Is that so?” Neville inquired, helping himself to more mint jelly. “And what abilities are those, Madame?”

Madame Delacroix composed herself, having given Professor Franklyn a wilting, albeit blind glare. “De old man, he don’t know what he speaks of. I just know about de sources he not as familiar with, bein’ more int’rested in his machines and gizmos.”

Franklyn’s smile, for the first time, seemed icy. “Madame Delacroix is being modest. She is, you may already know, one of our country’s foremost experts on Remote Physio-Apparition. Do you know what that is, James?”

James didn’t have the slightest idea, and yet something about the milky gaze of Madame Delacroix made him reluctant to say so. Franklyn was watching him earnestly, expecting a response. Finally, James shook his head. Before Franklyn could explain, however, Harry spoke up.

“It just means that the Madame has, let’s say, different means of getting around.”

“Different means’ is one way to put it,” Franklyn chuckled. James felt uneasy, hearing that chuckle. There was something nasty in it. He noticed that Franklyn was emptying what was likely his third glass of wine. “Think about it, James. Remote Physio-Apparition. Can you factor it out? It means that poor old blind Madame Delacroix can project herself, send a version of herself out into the wide world, collect things, and even bring them back. And the beauty of it is, the version of herself she can project isn’t poor or old *or* blind. Isn’t that right, Madame?”

Delacroix stared blindly at a spot just over Franklyn’s shoulder, her face a grim mask of anger. Then she smiled, and as James had seen on the day of the Americans’ arrival, the smile transformed her face. “Oh, deah Professah Franklyn, you do tell such tales,” she said, and her strange bayou accent seemed even thicker than usual. “My skills were never as grand as ye speak of, and they’re far less now that I’m de old woman ye see before ye. If I could project such a sight, I hardly think I’d ever let anyone see me as I really am.”

The tension in the room broke and there was laughter. Franklyn smiled a bit tightly, but let the moment pass.

After dessert, Harry, James, and the rest of the Hogwartians retired to the common room again, where Franklyn’s Daylight Savings Device had reproduced a condensed and shimmering version of the Milky Way. It lit the room with a silvery glow that James thought he could very nearly feel on his skin. Jackson offered the adults an after dinner cocktail in tiny glasses. Neville barely touched his. Both Miss Sacarina and Mr. Recreant sampled tiny sips and gave forced, rather strained smiles. Harry, after holding it up to the light to look through the amber liquid, downed his in one gulp. He squinted and shook his head, then looked inquiringly at Jackson, unable to speak.

“Just a little of Tennessee’s finest, with a little wizard afterburn thrown in,” Jackson explained.

Finally, Harry thanked the Americans and bid them goodnight.

Retracing their steps through the darkened corridors, Harry walked with his hand on James' shoulder.

"Want to stay with me in the guest quarters, James?" he asked. "I can't guarantee I'll be able to see much of you after tonight. I'll be busy all day tomorrow, meeting with the Americans, keeping our friends from the Department of Ambassadorial Relations from making 'an international incident' of themselves, then I'm off home again. What do you say?"

"Sure!" James agreed instantly. "Where are your quarters?"

Harry smiled. "Watch this," he said quietly, stopping in the middle of the hall. He turned around and paced idly, looking thoughtfully up at the dim ceiling. "I need... a really cool room with a couple of beds for me and my boy to sleep in tonight."

James stared at his dad quizzically. Several seconds went by as Harry continued to pace back and forth. He seemed to be waiting for something. James was about to ask him what he was up to when he heard a sudden noise. A low grind and rumble came from the wall behind him. James turned around just in time to see the stonework alter and shift, reforming itself around a huge door that hadn't been there a moment before. Harry glanced down at his son, smiled knowingly, then reached and opened the door.

Inside was a large apartment, complete with a set of draped bunk beds, framed Gryffindor posters on the walls, a wardrobe containing Harry's trunk and James' school robes, and a fully equipped washroom. James stood inside the door, opening and closing his mouth, speechless.

"The Room of Requirement," Harry explained, plopping onto a low, overstuffed chair. "I can't believe I never told you about it."

James got ready for bed, but his dad simply changed into a pair of jeans and a sweater and freshened up in the basin.

"I need to go out for a little while," he told James. "After dinner tonight, Professor Franklyn asked me to meet him privately. He wanted some time to discuss a few things outside of tomorrow's official meetings." There was something about the way Harry said this that told James his dad preferred a private chat over an official meeting anyway. "I shouldn't be too long, and I'll be just down the hall, in the Americans' quarters. Breakfast tomorrow, you and me?"

James nodded happily. He still hadn't brought himself to tell his dad about his abysmal failure on the Quidditch pitch, and he was happy to put it off as long as possible.

When Harry was gone, James lay in the top bunk, thinking about the events of the night. He remembered the sudden nastiness of Franklyn, which had surprised him. It was almost as great a change in character as the change that came over the voodoo queen, Madame Delacroix, when she smiled. Thinking of Madame Delacroix reminded James of the way she'd spooned the gumbo, unseeingly, operating the ladle with her creepy black wand, never spilling a drop.

James realized he was simply too excited to sleep. He slid off the top bunk and prowled the room restlessly. His dad's trunk sat open in the bottom of the wardrobe. James looked into it idly, then stopped and looked closer. He knew what it was when he saw it, but was surprised his dad would have brought it along. What use would he have for it here? James considered it. Finally, he reached into the trunk and withdrew his dad's Invisibility Cloak, unfolding its smooth, heavy length as it came.

How many times had the young Harry Potter explored the grounds of Hogwarts safely hidden away under this cloak? James had heard enough tales, from both his dad, Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione, to know that this was an opportunity not to be missed. But where to go?

James thought for a moment, and then smiled a long, mischievous smile. He slipped the cloak over his head, just the way he used to on the rare occasions when Harry would let him play with it. James vanished. A moment later, the door of the Room of Requirement seemed to open all by itself, rocking slowly on its huge hinges. After a pause, it shut again, carefully and silently.

Tiptoeing, James headed for the quarters of the representatives of Alma Aleron.



James had only gotten halfway down the corridor when there was a flicker of motion. Mrs. Norris, Filch's awful cat, had darted across the passage that intersected the corridor twenty feet ahead. James stopped, his breath caught in his chest. "Shouldn't you be dead by now, you ratty old carpet sample?" he whispered to himself, cursing his luck. Then, worse, Filch's voice came echoing down the passage.

"That's it, dearest," he said in a singsong voice. "Don't let the little buggers escape. Teach them a lesson that will have their little mousey kin shivering with fear." Filch's shadow leaked across the floor of the intersection, weaving as he approached.

James knew he was invisible, but he couldn't help feeling that he should hunker up against the wall. He sidled into a narrow space between a doorway and a suit of armor, trying to keep his breathing shallow and silent. He peered around the elbow of the suit of armor.

Filch stepped into the intersection, his gait rather unsteady. "Find a hidey-hole, did they, precious?" he asked the unseen Mrs. Norris. He reached into his coat and produced a silver flask. He took a swig, wiped

his mouth with his sleeve, and then spun the cap back on. “There they are, coming this way again, my dear. Come, come.”

Two mice scurried into the intersection, looping and dodging as they approached Filch’s feet. Mrs. Norris pounced, batting at them, but the mice scampered away, darting along the wall toward where James was hiding. Mrs. Norris followed, growling. To James’ great chagrin, the mice scampered behind the suit of armor and wriggled under the edge of the Invisibility Cloak. Their cold little feet scurried over James’ bare toes, then they stopped between his feet, sniffing the air as if sensing a hiding place. James tried to push them out from under the cloak with his toes, but they refused to go.

Mrs. Norris padded down the corridor intently, her whiskers twitching. She hunkered along the front of the suit of armor’s base, one paw outstretched, then pounced around it, stopping inches from the edge of the Invisibility Cloak. She looked around, her eyes flashing, sensing the mice were nearby, but not seeing them.

“Don’t tell me those dumb animals have bested you, my dear,” Filch said, scuffling down the corridor toward them.

James watched Mrs. Norris. She had encountered the Invisibility Cloak before, years earlier. James knew the stories, having been told them by both Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron. Maybe she remembered the smell of it. Or maybe she was sensing James himself, his heat or scent or the beat of his heart. She raised her eyes, narrowing them, as if she knew he was there and was trying very hard to see him.

“Don’t be a sore loser, my dear Mrs. Norris,” Filch said, coming closer still. He was almost near enough that if he reached out, he might inadvertently touch James. “If they got away, they’ll just tell their rodent friends about you. It’s a victory either way you slice it.”

Mrs. Norris inched closer. The mice between James’ feet were getting nervous. They tried to hide under each other, scooting further back between James’ feet. Mrs. Norris raised a paw. To James’ horror, she brushed the edge of the Invisibility Cloak with it. She hissed.

The mice, hearing the hiss, panicked. They scampered out from under the cloak, darting right between Mrs. Norris’ feet. She jumped at the sight of them, ducking to watch them scurry away into the corridor. Filch laughed raspily.

“They put the spook on you, precious! I’d never have expected it. There they go! After them, now!”

But Mrs. Norris half turned back toward James, her baleful orange eyes narrowed, her slit pupils flared wide. She raised her paw again.

“Go, Mrs. Norris, go!” Filch said, his mood swinging to annoyance. He shoved her with his foot, scooching her away from James and toward the mice, which had disappeared further along the corridor. Filch’s foot caught the edge of the cloak, pulling it away from James’ feet. He felt cool air on his toes.

Mrs. Norris looked back toward James and hissed again. Filch, however, was too sodden to take heed. “They went that way, you blind old thing. I’d have never guessed a pair of dumb animals would get the jump on you. Let’s go, let’s go. There’re always more near the kitchens.” He ambled on into the shadows of the corridor and eventually Mrs. Norris followed, throwing occasional rankled glances back towards James.

When they turned the corner, he exhaled shakily, composed himself, then continued down the corridor, running lightly and feeling extremely lucky.

When he reached the door to the Americans’ quarters it was closed and bolted. In the darkness, James could hear the voices of his dad and Franklyn inside, but they were muffled and unintelligible. He was about to give up and head downstairs, thinking he might perhaps find Cedric’s ghost again, or even the Muggle intruder, when the voices inside the door grew louder. The bolt socked back and James scrambled out of the way, forgetting for a moment that he was hidden under the cloak. He pressed himself against the wall on the opposite side of the corridor just as the door creaked open. Franklyn emerged first, talking quietly. Harry followed, closing the door with the practiced stealth of any good Auror. “Practice being quiet when you don’t need to,” Harry had told his son on many occasions, “and you won’t need to think about it when you do.”

“I find it’s safer to move around during a private conversation,” Franklyn was saying. “Even our own quarters are subject to eavesdropping by those whose philosophies differ from my own. At least this way no, unwanted ears can hear the entirety of our dialogue.”

“Funny thing,” Harry said. “I spent so much time sneaking around these halls and corridors when I was a student that even as an adult, it’s difficult to avoid the instinct to skulk and sneak, for fear that I might get caught and be given detention.”

The two men began to walk slowly, apparently meandering in no particular direction. James followed at a safe distance, taking care not to breathe too heavily or stumble against any of the statues or suits of armor that lined the walls. “Things haven’t changed much, you know,” Franklyn said. “Now, however, we have worse things than detention to worry about.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, and James could hear the wry smile in his voice. “I had some pretty horrible detentions.”

“Mm,” Franklyn murmured noncommittally. “The history of both our schools has involved some unsavory characters and unnecessary ugliness. Your Miss Umbridge, our Professor Magnussen. Your Voldemort, our... well, honestly, we have no one in our history that compares to him. Indeed, he was a terrible threat to all of us while he lived. Our duty is to ensure that such things don’t happen again.”

“Am I to assume that this meeting, then, is an opportunity to compare notes about such threats? Off the record, so to speak?” Harry asked seriously.

Franklyn sighed. “One can never have too many friends or too many sources, Mr. Potter. I am not an Auror, and I do not have any official authority or policing jurisdiction even in my own country. I am just an old teacher. Old teachers, however, are often underestimated, as you certainly know. Old teachers see quite a lot.”

“You have your own version of the Progressive Element at Alma Aleron?”

“Oh, it’s beyond that, unfortunately. For most of the students and even the staff, the facts of Voldemort and his Death Eaters are up for conjecture. It’s incredible how short a time must pass before a certain kind of mentality feels it is safe to turn history onto its head.”

“The Progressive Element here knows they need to be very careful,” Harry said in a low voice. “Enough people are still alive who have firsthand memories of Voldemort and his atrocities. Enough people still remember lost family and friends, killed at the hand of his Death Eaters. Still, the lure to challenge the status quo, whatever it may be, is strong in the young. It’s natural, but typically short-lived. History will out, as they say.”

“History is bunk,” Franklyn said disgustedly. “I should know. I lived during quite a bit of it, and I can indeed tell you that sometimes, there is, in fact, a wide gulf between what gets reported and what actually happened.”

“I would expect that that is the exception and not the rule,” Harry stated.

Franklyn sighed as they turned a corner. “I suppose. The fact is, though, that the exceptions give rabble-rousers like the Progressive Element all the ammunition they need to challenge any historical record they wish. The history of Voldemort and his rise to power, as we know it, doesn’t fit their agenda. Thus, they carefully attack it, sowing the seeds of doubt among minds shallow enough to believe the distortions.”

“It sounds,” Harry said, keeping his voice low and conversational, “like you have a pretty good idea what their agenda is.”

“Of course I do, and so do you, Mr. Potter. The agenda hasn’t changed for a thousand years, has it?”

“No, it hasn’t.”

“Harry Potter.” Franklyn stopped in the darkness of the corridor, looking at Harry’s face. “Even now, a sizeable minority in my country believe that Lord Tom Riddle, as they prefer to call him, has been unfairly demonized by you who defeated him. They prefer to believe that Voldemort was a revolutionary hero, a fresh thinker, whose beliefs were simply too much for the traditional ruling class to tolerate. They think he was destroyed because he threatened to make things better, not worse, but that the wealthy and powerful were resistant even to a change for the good.”

James, standing several feet away, hidden under the cloak, could see his dad’s jaw clenching as Franklyn spoke. But when Harry responded, his voice remained calm and measured.

“You know that these are lies and distortions, I assume.”

“Of course I do,” Franklyn said, waving a hand dismissively, almost angrily. “But the point is that they are *attractive* lies to a certain type of person. Those that preach these distortions know how to appeal to the emotions of the populace. They believe the truth is a wire to bend to their will. It is their agenda only that they care for.”

Harry remained stoic and unmoving. “And the agenda, you believe, is the domination of the Muggle world?”

Franklyn laughed rather harshly, and James thought of the nasty chuckle the professor had made during dinner, when discussing Madame Delacroix’s powers. “Not to hear them tell it. No, they are crafty these days. They claim to be for the exact opposite. Their rallying cry is absolute equality between the Muggle and magical worlds. Full disclosure, the abolition of all laws of secrecy and non-competition. They preach that anything less is unfair to the Muggles, an insult to them.”

Harry nodded grimly. “As we are seeing here. Of course, it is a two-edged sword. Prejudice and equality in the same message.”

“Certainly,” Franklyn agreed, resuming his walk along the corridor. “In America, we are seeing a resurgence of stories about Muggle scientists capturing witches and wizards, torturing them to discover the secret of their magic.”

“A throwback to the old Salem witch trials?” Harry asked.

Franklyn laughed, and this time there was no malice in it. “Hardly. Those were the good old days. Sure, witches were put on trial, and loads of them were burned, but as you know, any witch worth her wand wouldn’t be hurt by a Muggle bonfire. She’d stand in the flames and yell for a while, just to give the Muggles a good show, then transport herself from the pyre flames to her own fireplace. That was the origin of the Floo Network, of course. No, these days, the stories of witches and wizards being captured and systematically tortured are pure fabrications. That doesn’t matter to the faithful, though. The culture of fear and prejudice works side-by-side with their mission of ‘equality’. Full disclosure, they claim, will bring peace and freedom. Continuing the program of secrecy, on the other hand, can only lead to more attacks on wizarding society by an increasingly invasive Muggle world.”

Harry stopped by a window. “And once they’ve achieved their goal of total disclosure with the Muggle world?”

“Well, there’s only one outcome to that, isn’t there?” Franklyn answered.

Harry’s face was thoughtful in the moonlight. “Muggles and wizards would descend into competitions and jealousies, just like they did in eons past. The dark wizards would make sure of it. It would start as small challenges and outbursts. Laws would be passed, enforcing equal treatment, but those laws would become the basis for new contentions. Wizards would demand to be placed into Muggle power

structures, all in the name of 'equality'. Once there, they'd push for greater control, more power. They'd win over Muggle leaders, using promises and lies where they could, threats and the Imperius Curse where they couldn't. Eventually, order would break down. Finally, inevitably, there would be all-out war." Harry's voice had gone soft, considering. He turned to Franklyn, who stood watching him, his face calm but dreadful. "And that's what they want, isn't it? War with the Muggle world."

"That's what they've always wanted," Franklyn agreed. "The struggle never stops. It just has different chapters."

"Who's involved?" Harry asked simply.

Franklyn sighed again, hugely, and rubbed his eyes. "It's not so simple. It's virtually impossible to tell the instigators from their followers. There are some individuals it would be instructive to watch closely, though."

"Madame Delacroix."

Franklyn glanced up, studying Harry's face. He nodded. "And Professor Jackson."

James gasped, and then clapped his hand over his mouth. His dad and Professor Franklyn stood very still. James was sure they'd heard him. Then Harry spoke again.

"Anyone else?"

Franklyn shook his head slowly. "Of course. But then you'd just be watching everyone and everything. It's like an infestation of cockroaches in the walls. You can either watch the cracks or burn down the house. Take your pick."

James backed away very carefully, then when he felt safely out of earshot, he turned and retraced his steps back to the Americans' quarters. His heart was pounding so heavily he had been sure that his dad or Professor Franklyn would hear it.

He knew the so-called Progressive Element was no good, but now he knew it must be them that were planning the return of Merlinus Ambrosius, believing he would help them to accomplish their false goal of equality, which would lead inevitably to war. Merlin had said that he would return when the balance between Muggles and wizards was 'ripe for his ministrations'. What else could that mean? He hadn't been surprised that Madame Delacroix might be involved in such a plot. But Professor Jackson? James had come to quite like the professor, despite his crusty exterior. He could hardly imagine that Jackson could be secretly plotting the domination of the Muggle world. Franklyn had to be wrong about him.

James ran lightly past the Americans' quarters, looking for the door to the guest room he and his dad were staying in. With a sudden stab of fear, he remembered that the doorway had vanished when he'd come out. It was a magical room, after all. How was he supposed to get back in? He had to be inside the room, apparently asleep, by the time his dad came back. He stopped in the corridor, not even sure what stretch of

wall the doorway had appeared in. He glanced around hopelessly, unable to keep himself from looking for some subtle clue or hint of where the doorway was hidden. What had his dad called it? The 'Room of Requirement'? James had remembered his wand this time. He pulled it out and shook his hand out from under the cloak, revealing it.

“Uh,” he began, whispering harshly and pointing his wand at the wall. “Room of Requirement... open?”

Nothing happened, of course. And then James heard a noise. His senses had grown almost painfully sharp as his body shot full of adrenaline. He listened, his eyes wide. Voices. Franklyn and his dad were coming back already. They must have begun their return journey at almost exactly the same time as James, but a little slower. He heard them talking in hushed voices, probably as they stood by the door into Franklyn's rooms. His dad would be returning in mere moments.

James thought furiously. What had his dad done to open the room? He had just stood there, hadn't he, waiting, and then bang, there was the door? No, James recalled, he had spoken first. And paced a bit. James replayed the evening in his memory, trying to remember what his dad had said, but he was too flustered.

Light bloomed at the end of the corridor. Footsteps approached. James looked down the corridor frantically. His dad was approaching, wand lit but held low, his head down. James remembered that he had his own wand held out, his arm outside the cloak. He yanked it in as quickly and silently as he could, arranging the cloak to cover him completely. It was hopeless. His dad would enter the room and see that James wasn't there. Maybe James could follow him in and claim to have been to his rooms to get a book he needed? He had never been any good at lying. Besides, he'd have the cloak with him. He almost groaned out loud.

Harry Potter stopped in the corridor. He held the wand up and looked at the wall. “I need to get into the room my son is sleeping in,” he said conversationally. Nothing happened. Harry didn't seem surprised.

“Hmm,” he said, apparently to himself. “I wonder why the door won't open. I suppose...,” he looked around raising his eyebrows and smiling very slightly, “it's because my son isn't sleeping in the Room of Requirement at all, but is standing here in the corridor with me, under my Invisibility Cloak, trying as hard as he can to remember how in the world to open the door. Right, James?”

James let out his breath and yanked the Invisibility Cloak off. “You knew all along, didn't you?”

“I assumed it when I heard you gasp downstairs. I didn't know for sure until the trick with the door. Come on, let's get inside.” Harry Potter chuckled tiredly. He paced three times and spoke the words that opened the Room of Requirement and they went in.

When they were both in their beds, James in the top bunk, staring up at the dark ceiling, Harry spoke.

“You don’t have to follow in my footsteps, James. I hope you know that.”

James worked his jaw, not ready to respond to that. He listened and waited.

“You were down there tonight, so you heard Professor Franklyn,” Harry finally said. “There’s one part of what he said that I want you to remember. There are always plots and revolutions in the works. The battle is always the same, just with different chapters. It isn’t your job to save the world, son. Even if you do, it’ll just go and get itself into danger again, and again, and again. It’s the nature of things.”

Harry paused and James heard him laugh quietly. “I know how it feels. I remember the great weight of responsibility and the heady thrill of believing I was the only one to stop the evil, to win the war, to battle for the ultimate good. But James, even then, that wasn’t my duty alone. It was everyone’s fight. Everyone’s sacrifice. And there were those whose sacrifice was far greater than my own. It isn’t one man’s duty to save the world. And it certainly isn’t the duty of one boy who can’t even figure out how to open the Room of Requirement yet.”

James heard movement from the bunk below. His dad stood, his head rising to look at James in the top bunk. In the darkness, James couldn’t make out his expression, but he knew it nonetheless. His dad was smiling his crooked, knowing smile. His dad knew it all. His dad was Harry Potter.

“What do you think, son?”

James took a deep breath. He wanted to tell his dad about everything he’d seen and heard. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell him about the Muggle intruder, and Cedric Diggory’s ghost, and the secret of Austramaddux, the plot to return Merlin and use him to start a final war with the Muggles. But in the end, he decided not to. He smiled at his dad.

“I know, Dad. Don’t worry about me. If I decide to save the world single-handedly, I’ll send you and Mum a note first. OK?”

Harry smirked and shook his head, not really buying it, but knowing there was no point in pressing the point. He climbed back into the bottom bunk.

Five minutes later, James spoke up in the dark. “Hey, Dad, any chance you might let me keep the Invisibility Cloak with me for the school year?”

“None at all, my boy. None at all,” Harry said sleepily. James heard him roll over. A few minutes later, both slept.



When James and Harry Potter entered the Great Hall the next morning, James sensed the mood of the room change. He was used to the reaction that the wizarding community showed whenever he was out with his dad, but this was different. Rather than turning to look at them, James sensed people looking pointedly in the other direction. Conversations quieted. There was the strange sensation of people glancing at them sideways or turning to watch once James and Harry had passed them. James felt a surge of anger. Who were these people? Most of them were good witches and wizards, from hardworking parents who had always been supportive of Harry Potter, first as the Boy Who Lived, then as the young man who helped bring about the downfall of Voldemort, and finally as the man who was Head Auror. Now, just because some rabble-rousers had painted a few signs and spread around a few stupid rumors, they were afraid to look directly at him.

Even as James thought that, however, he saw that he was wrong. As Harry and James sat down at the end of the Gryffindor table (James had pleaded with his dad not to make him sit up at the teachers' table on the dais), there were a few grins and hearty greetings. Ted saw Harry, whooped, and ran down the length of table, giving Harry a complicated handshake that involved a lot of banging fists, hand grips and finally, an embrace that was one part hug and one part body slam.

Harry collapsed onto the bench, laughing. "Ted, you're going to knock yourself clean out one of these times."

"My godfather, everybody," Ted said, as if introducing Harry to the room at large. "Have you met Noah yet, Harry? He's a Gremlin, like me and Petra."

Harry shook Noah's hand. "I think we met last year at the Quidditch championship, yes?"

"Sure," Noah said. "That was the game where Ted scored the winning point for the opposing team. How could I forget?"

"Technically, it was an assist," Ted said primly. "I happened to wallop their team's Quaffle carrier through the goal on accident. I was aiming for the press box."

"Hate to interrupt, but do you guys mind if James and I get a little breakfast?" Harry asked, gesturing toward the table.

"Have at it," Ted replied magnanimously. "And if any of these malcontents give you any trouble, just let me know. It's Quidditch tonight, and we hold grudges." He eyed the room grimly, then grinned and sauntered away.

“I’d tell him not to sweat it, but that’d be taking away his fun, wouldn’t it?” Harry said, watching Ted depart. James grinned. They both began to fill their plates from the steaming platters along the table. As they began to eat, James was pleased to see Ralph and Zane enter. He waved them over enthusiastically.

“Hey, Dad, here’re my friends, Zane and Ralph,” James said as they piled onto the benches, one on either side. “Zane’s the blond one, Ralph’s the brick house.”

“Pleased to meet you, Zane, Ralph,” Harry said. “James tells me good things about both of you.”

“I’ve read about you,” Ralph said, staring at Harry. “Did you really do all that stuff?”

Harry laughed. “Straight shooter, isn’t he?” he said, raising an eyebrow at James. “The major points, yes, those are probably true. Although if you’d’ve been there, it would have seemed a lot less heroic at the time. Mostly, me and my friends were just trying to keep ourselves from getting blasted, eaten, or cursed.”

Zane seemed uncharacteristically quiet. “Hey, what’s the deal?” James said, nudging him. “You’re a little too new to all this to have an idol complex about the Great Harry Potter.”

Zane grimaced, and then pulled a copy of the *Daily Prophet* from his backpack. “This stinks,” he said, sighing and flopping the paper open onto the table, “but you’re gonna see it sooner or later.”

James leaned over and glanced at it. ‘Hogwarts Anti-Auror Demonstration Overshadows International Summit’, the main headline read. Below it, in smaller type: ‘Potter Visit Sets Off School-wide Protest as Magical Community Re-evaluates Auror Policies’. James felt his cheeks flush red with anger. Before he could respond, however, his dad placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Hmm,” Harry said mildly. “That’s got Rita Skeeter’s name all over it.”

Zane frowned at Harry, then glanced at the paper again. “You can tell who wrote it just by the headline?”

“No,” Harry laughed, dismissing the newspaper and digging into a slice of French toast. “Her name’s on the byline. Still, yeah, that is pretty much her typical brand of tripe. It hardly matters. The world will forget it by this time next week.”

James was reading the first paragraph, his brow furrowed furiously. “She says that most of the school was there, protesting and shouting. That’s complete rubbish! I saw it, and if there were more than a hundred people there, I’ll kiss a Blast-Ended Skrewt! Besides, most of them were just there to see what was going on! There were only fifteen or twenty people with the signs and the slogans!”

Harry sighed. “It’s just a story, James. It isn’t supposed to be accurate, it’s supposed to sell papers.”

“But how can you let them say things like this? It’s dangerous! Professor Franklyn--”

The look Harry gave him stopped him from going any further. After a second, Harry's expression softened. "I know what you are worried about, James, and I don't blame you. But there are ways of handling these things, and one of those ways *isn't* arguing with people like Rita Skeeter."

"You sound like McGonagall," James said, dropping his eyes and jabbing at a chunk of sausage.

"I should," Harry replied quickly. "She taught me. And I think it's Headmistress McGonagall to you."

James poked at his plate sullenly for a moment. Then, not wanting to look at it anymore, he folded the newspaper roughly and stuck it out of sight.

"First Quidditch of the season tonight, then, right?" Harry asked, waving his fork at the three boys in general.

"Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor!" Zane announced. "My first game! I can hardly wait."

James looked up and saw his dad grinning at Zane. "You made the Ravenclaw team, then! That's very cool. If I can finish early enough, I plan on coming to the match. I look forward to seeing you fly. What position will you play?"

"Beater," Zane said, pretending to swat a Bludger with his fork.

"He's pretty good, Mr. Potter," Ralph said earnestly. "I saw him fly his first time. He just about made a crater in the middle of the pitch, but he pulled up at the last second."

"That takes some serious control," Harry acknowledged, studying Zane. "You've had broom lessons?"

"Not a one!" Ralph cried, as if he were Zane's public relations agent. "That's the amazing bit, isn't it?"

James looked at Ralph, his face grim, trying to catch his eye and warn him off the topic, but it was already too late.

"He probably wouldn't have figured it out at all," Ralph said, "if he hadn't taken off after James when he did the big outta-control-like-a-bottle-rocket-rumba." Ralph squirmed on the bench, mimicking James' inaugural broom flight.

"But you'll be supporting the Gryffindors, of course!" Zane interrupted suddenly, planting his palm on Ralph's forehead and pushing him backwards.

Harry glanced around the table, chewing a chunk of toast, a quizzical look on his face. "Er, well, yes. Of course," he admitted, still looking from boy to boy.

“Yeah, well, that’s cool. I understand completely,” Zane said quickly, waggling his eyebrows at Ralph who was sitting there looking nonplussed. “Be true to your school and all that. Whoop. Look at the time. Come on, Ralphinator. Classes to get to.”

“I have a free period first,” Ralph protested. “And I haven’t had any breakfast yet.”

“Let’s go, ya lunkhead!” Zane insisted, coming around the table and hooking Ralph’s elbow. Zane could barely move Ralph, but Ralph allowed himself to be tugged along.

“What?” Ralph said loudly, frowning at the meaningful look Zane was giving him. “What’d I do? Did I say something I wasn’t--” He stopped. His eyebrows shot up and he turned back to James, looking mortified. “Oh. Ah,” he said as Zane pulled him toward the door. As they rounded the corner, James heard Ralph say, “I’m just a big idiot, aren’t I?”

James sighed. “So yeah, I stink at Quidditch. I’m sorry.”

Harry studied his son. “Pretty bad, was it?”

James nodded. “I know,” he said. “It’s no big deal. It’s just Quidditch. There’s always next year. I don’t have to do it just because you did it. I know, I know. You don’t have to say it.”

Harry continued to stare at James, his jaw moving slightly, as if he was thinking. Finally he sat back and picked up his pumpkin juice. “Well, that’s a load off my chest, then. Sounds like you’ve done my job for me.”

James looked up at his dad. Harry looked back at him as he took a very long, slow drink from his glass. He seemed to be smiling, and hiding his smile behind the glass. James tried not to laugh. *This is serious*, he told himself. *This isn’t funny. This is Quidditch.* On that thought, his composure cracked slightly. He smiled, and then tried to cover it with his hand, which only made it worse.

Harry lowered his glass and grinned, shaking his head slowly. “You’ve really been worried about this, haven’t you, James?”

James’ smile faltered again. He swallowed. “Yeah, Dad. Of course I have. I mean, it’s Quidditch. It’s your sport, and Granddad’s, too. I’m James Potter. I’m supposed to be excellent on a broom. Not a danger to myself and everybody around me.”

Harry leaned forward, putting his glass down and looking James in the eye. “And you may still be great on the broom, James. Merlin’s beard, son, it’s your first week and you’ve not even had your first broom lesson, have you? Back when I started here, we wouldn’t have even been allowed to get on a practice broom without lessons, much less try out for the House teams.”

“But even if you had,” James interrupted, “you’d have been excellent at it.”

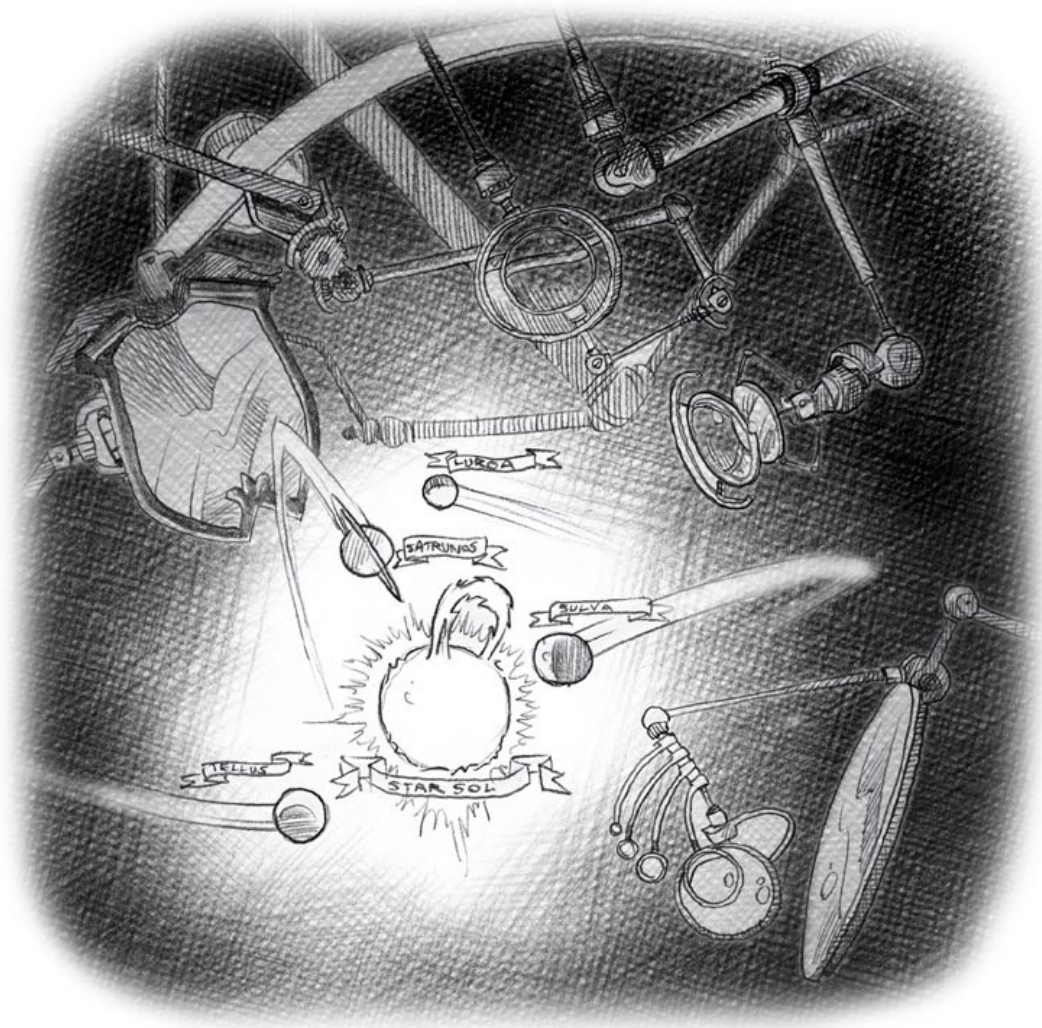
“That’s not the point son. You are so worried about living up to the myth of who I was supposed to be that you aren’t giving yourself a chance to be even better. You’re defeating yourself before you even start. Don’t you see that? No one can compete with a legend. Even *I* wish I was half the wizard the stories make me out to be. Every day, I look in the mirror and tell myself not to try so hard to be the Famous Harry Potter, but just to relax and let myself be your dad, and your mum’s husband, and the best Auror I can be, which sometimes doesn’t seem to be all that great, to tell you the truth. You have to stop thinking of yourself as the son of Harry Potter...” Harry paused, seeing that James had really heard him, perhaps for the first time. He smiled a little again. “And give me the chance to think of myself simply as James Potter’s dad instead. Because of all the things I’ve done in my life, raising you, Albus, and Lily, are the three things I am proudest of. Got it?”

James smiled again, crookedly. He didn’t know it, but it was the same crooked smile he so often saw on his dad’s face. “All right, Dad. I’ll try that. But it’s hard.”

Harry nodded understandingly and sat back. After a moment, he said, “Am I always that predictable?”

James broke into a knowing grin. “Sure, Dad. You and Mum both. ‘You aren’t going outside wearing that, are you?’” Harry laughed out loud at James’ impression of Ginny. James went on. “‘It’s cold in here, put on a sweater! Don’t say that word in front of your grandmum! Stop playing with the garden gnomes or you’ll get green thumbs!’”

Harry was still laughing and wiping his eyes as they said goodbye, promising to meet that evening at the Quidditch match.





7. BROKEN LOYALTY

James' first class, ironically, was Basic Broom. The teacher was a giant slab of a man named Cabriel Ridcully. He wore a fawn-colored sport cloak over his Quidditch official's tunic, which displayed his enormous forearms and calves.

"Good morning, first years!" he boomed, and James guessed that Cabe Ridcully was one of the world's great morning people. "Welcome to Basic Broom. Most of you know me already, having seen me at the Quidditch matches and tournaments and whatnot. We'll be spending this year getting familiar with the fundamentals of flight. I believe in a very hands-on approach, so we'll all be jumping right into essential broom-handling and control. Everyone approach your brooms, please."

James had been dreading getting back onto a broom again, but as the class progressed, he found that, with proper guidance, he was able to manage getting his broom to levitate and support him, and even control its altitude and speed in very small formations. He realized that there were subtle variations in how the broom responded, based on speed and inclination. If the broom was merely hovering, leaning forward on the broomstick pressed it forwards, while pulling up drove it backwards. Once the broom was moving, however, those same controls began to also manage height. The faster the broom was moving, the more James' posture controlled altitude instead of speed. Finding the fine difference between a speed-lean and an altitude-lean was dependent entirely on the velocity of the broomstick at any given time. James sensed that the slightest panic would cause him to lose even the tiny degree of control he had already learned, and he began to understand why he'd been so dreadful during the Quidditch tryouts.

As pleased as James was at his own tentative control of the broomstick, he still felt a shudder of jealousy when he saw Zane managing his broom through elaborate, effortless swoops and banks.

“Let’s avoid showboating, Mr. Walker,” Ridcully called reproachfully, and James couldn’t help feeling a petty surge of gratification. “Save it for the match tonight, why don’t you?”

Ralph’s entire body was tensed as he struggled to stay atop his broom. He’d gotten it to float about four feet off the ground and seemed to be stuck there. “How do I get it to swoop like that?” he asked, watching Zane.

James shook his head. “I’d just worry about staying right-side up if I was you, Ralph.”

The rest of the morning’s classes were far less interesting, with Basic Spellwork and Ancient Runes. At lunch, James explained to Ralph and Zane the happenings of the night before. He told them about Franklyn’s Daylight Savings Device, and the dinner conversation involving Madame Delacroix’s voodoo powers. Finally, he explained the conversation he had heard between his dad and Professor Franklyn, and how it fit in with the Austramaddux story about Merlin’s predicted return.

“So,” Zane said, narrowing his eyes and staring thoughtfully at the wall behind James’ head, “I am to understand that your dad has a cloak... that makes anyone who wears it invisible.”

James moaned, exasperated. “Yes! That’s hardly the point, though, is it?”

“Speak for yourself. I mean, forget x-ray specs. Just think what a guy could do with an Invisibility Cloak. Is it steam-resistant, do you think?”

James rolled his eyes. “I don’t think that the wizard who spent his lifetime creating the world’s most perfect invisible garment did it to sneak into the girls’ showers.”

“But you don’t *know* that, do you?” Zane said, undeterred.

Ralph chewed slowly, thinking. “So Franklyn told your dad that there were wizards in the States who were pushing for the same thing as the Progressive Element? Muggle and wizard equality and all that?”

James nodded. “Yeah, but it’s all just a sham, isn’t it? I mean, since when have Slytherins really wanted anything nice for the Muggle world? All the old pureblood Slytherin houses have always been for going public, but just so they can take over the Muggle world and rule it. They think Muggles are an inferior species, not equals.”

Ralph looked oddly troubled. “Well, maybe. I don’t know. Most of the people out in the courtyard the other day weren’t even Slytherins, though. Did you notice that?”

James hadn’t, actually. “Doesn’t really matter. It was the Slytherins that got the whole thing started, with the Progressive Element slogans and badges and stuff. You said so yourself, Ralph. Tabitha Corsica was handing the badges out to all the Slytherins. She’s behind the whole thing.”

“I don’t think she’s in on it like *you* think she is,” Ralph said, “with this whole bringing-Merlin-back-from-the-dead plot and all that. She just thinks we should be fair to everybody, Muggle and wizard alike. She’s not trying to start a war or anything stupid. I mean, really, it *doesn’t* seem fair that we shouldn’t be able to work in the Muggle world, does it? Or compete in Muggle games and sports? Just because we have magic on our side, doesn’t make us outcasts.”

“You sound just like one of them,” James said angrily.

“Well?” Ralph said suddenly, his face going red. “I *am* one of them, if you haven’t noticed. And I don’t appreciate the way you’re talking about my house. Things are a lot different now than they were when your dad went here. If you’re so worried about truth and history, you should be all for debate on the subject. Maybe Tabitha’s right about you.”

James sat back, his mouth dropping open.

Ralph lowered his eyes. “She wants me to be in the first school debate with Team A. I assume you know the topic. They’re calling it ‘Re-evaluating the Assumptions of the Past: Truth or Conspiracy?’”

“And you’re going to be on the team, then? You’re going to argue that my dad and his chums made the whole Voldemort story up just to scare people into keeping the wizarding world a secret?”

Ralph looked miserable. “Nobody believes your dad made it up, but…” He didn’t seem to know how to finish the sentence.

“Well!” James cried, throwing up his hands. “Great argument, then! I’m speechless! Tabitha sure has a great partner in you, hasn’t she?”

“But maybe your dad wasn’t on the right side after all!” Ralph said hotly. “Has that ever occurred to you? I mean, sure, people got killed. It was a war. But why is it that when your side killed people, it was a triumph of good, but when their side killed, it was an evil atrocity? The victors write the history books, you know. Maybe the truth of the whole affair has been skewed. How would you know? You weren’t even born yet.”

James threw his fork down onto the table. “I know my dad!” he shouted. “He didn’t kill anyone! He was on the right side, because my dad is a good man! Voldemort was a bloodthirsty monster who just wanted power and was willing to kill anyone who got in his way, even his friends! You might want to remember that, since you seem to be choosing to side with people like him!”

Ralph stared at James and swallowed. James knew, in some small, distant part of his mind, that he was overreacting. Ralph was Muggle-born: everything he knew about Voldemort and Harry Potter, he’d only read in the last two weeks. Besides, Ralph was being fed all this by his housemates, who he was desperate to get along with. Still, James was furious to the point of wanting to hit him, mostly because he didn’t dare hit any of the Slytherins who were directly responsible for the malicious, self-serving lies about his dad.

James broke eye contact first. He heard Ralph gather his books and backpack.

“Well,” Zane said tentatively, “I *was* going to see if you two wanted to meet after the match tonight for Butterbeers with the Gremlins, but maybe I’ll just take a rain check, eh?”

Neither Ralph nor James spoke. After a moment, Ralph walked away.

“You were pretty horrible to him, you know,” Zane said evenly.

“Me?” James exclaimed.

“Before you defend yourself,” Zane said, raising a hand in a conciliatory gesture, “just let me say, you’re right. Of course, it’s all a load of crap. But it’s Ralph. He’s just trying to get along. You know?”

“No,” James said flatly, “not when ‘getting along’ means talking up a bunch of lies about my dad.”

“He doesn’t know they’re lies,” Zane said reasonably. “He’s just a guy hearing all this for the first time. He wants to believe you, but he also wants to fit in with his house. Too bad for him they’re all a bunch of wacked-out, power-crazed lunatics.”

James felt slightly mollified. He knew Zane was right, but he still couldn’t quite regret his outburst against Ralph. “So? *You’re* just a new guy hearing all this for the first time, too. Why aren’t you running off to join the Progressive Element and chant slogans?”

“Because lucky for you,” Zane said, throwing an arm around James’ neck, “I got sorted into Ravenclaw, and they all hated Old Voldy just as much as you Gryffindors. Besides,” he looked slightly wistful, “I happen to think Petra Morganstern is, on the whole, just a little bit hotter than Tabitha Corsica.”

James elbowed Zane away from him, groaning.

They both went to the library for study period. Knossus Shert, the Ancient Runes professor, was monitoring the period, his thick glasses and long, skinny limbs in green robes making him look rather like a praying mantis seated behind the library head desk.

Zane was copying Arithmancy theorems, frowning as he worked them out. James, not wanting to disturb him, but equally disinterested in embarking on his own homework, pulled the morning’s copy of the *Daily Prophet* out of his backpack, where he’d stuffed it at breakfast. He glanced at the lead articles again, pressing his lips together in disgust. Near the bottom of the front page, James was annoyed to see a picture of Tabitha Corsica. She looked like she always did: reasonable, thoughtful, and polite. ‘Hogwarts Prefect Discusses Progressives Movement on Campus’, the headline next to her picture read. Knowing he shouldn’t read it, James glanced at a random couple of lines in the middle of the article.

“Of course, my house doesn’t believe in disturbing the harmony of the school for these discussions, but we respect the members of other houses as they voice their concerns,” Miss Corsica explained, her eyes full of regret for the disruptions of the day, but obviously recognizing the validity of her fellow students’ motivations. “Despite the Headmistress’ reluctance to be clear about the debate schedule, I am confident that we will be allowed to forge ahead with our plan to foster a discussion about Auror practices and policies, and the assumptions those are based on, in an open and free-ranging debate format.”

Miss Corsica, a fifth-year Slytherin, is also captain of her Quidditch team. “I had my broomstick fashioned by Muggle artisans,” she explains shyly. “They had no idea of the magical properties of the wood, and of course, I had it registered by the school as a Muggle artifact. But still, I just thought it would be nice to experience something handmade by our Muggle friends. It also happens to be one of the fastest brooms on the pitch,” she adds, biting her lip modestly, “but I credit that to the hands that made it, as much as to the spells that infuse the wood.”

James picked up the paper and flipped it over angrily, slapping it onto the table and earning a loud hush from Professor Shert.

He stared unseeingly at the back of the paper. How could anyone believe such obviously contrived drivel? Tabitha Corsica and her special-order Muggle-made broom were just the icing on the cake, and she knew it. When James had seen her in the courtyard, Tabitha had been giving her interview with Rita Skeeter. James remembered the breathless eagerness on Skeeter’s face as her quill danced across the parchment. Stupid, gullible woman, James thought. Still, apparently she was just being true to herself and her readership. James had been told about his dad’s first encounters with Skeeter, back during the Triwizard Tournament. Aunt Hermione had caught on to the secret that Rita Skeeter was an unregistered Animagus, her animal form being that of a beetle. Eventually, Hermione had captured Skeeter in her beetle form, preventing her, for a time, from continuing her assault on the truth via her articles in the *Daily Prophet*. This morning, however, Harry had told James that the way to fight for the truth was not to argue with people like Rita Skeeter. Frankly, James preferred Aunt Hermione’s methods to those his dad claimed to espouse these days.

As he ruminated on this, James’ eye roamed unseeingly over the headlines and pictures on the back of the paper. Suddenly, however, one headline caught his attention. He leaned over it, his brow furrowing.

Ministry Break-in Remains a Mystery

LONDON: Last week’s burglary of the Ministry of Magic Headquarters leaves Aurors and officials alike baffled, as questions still surface about

the burglars' motives and the possibility of inside accomplices. As reported by this news organ early last week, three individuals of questionable backgrounds were arrested on the morning of Monday, August 31st, related to a break-in and ransacking of several departments of the Ministry of Magic. The three alleged burglars, two humans and a goblin, were found during a search of the surrounding area hours after the break-in was discovered.

Upon the realization that the individuals had fallen under the *Langlock* jinx, rendering them incapable of responding to interrogation, all three were sent under guard to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. A search of the ransacked departments, which included the Department of International Magical Cooperation, the Currency Conversion Office, and the Department of Mysteries, however, revealed no apparently missing objects or moneys. The criminal charges were subsequently reduced to destruction of property and trespassing, and the story, while curious, was dismissed until late last week, when it became known that no amount of counter-curses or jinxes were having any effect on the *Langlocked* accused.

"These are remarkably powerful curses, involving a not insubstantial degree of dark magic charm work," said Dr. Horatio Flack, head of the counter-jinx facility at St. Mungo's. "If we are unable to release the curse on these men by this weekend, I am afraid the spells may become permanent."

As it turns out, one of the accused, identified to this reporter as the goblin, a Mr. Fikklis Bistle of Sussex, did begin to respond to the counter-jinxes over the course of the weekend. "He was making sounds and grunts, getting rather close to actual words," reported one of his nurses, who asked to remain anonymous. Shortly after dawn this morning, however, Mr. Bistle was found dead in his room, apparently the victim of a mislabeled medication. This has sparked a wide range of speculation, resulting in a renewed investigation into the break-in.

Quorina Greene, lead investigator for the case, was quoted as saying, "We are now primarily concerned with ascertaining how, exactly, these three individuals were able to gain entry into Ministry offices. These are small-time crooks, none having ever attempted something of this magnitude in the past. We cannot rule out the likelihood of outside help, or even a Ministry insider. The death of Mr. Bistle, however, while suspicious, is still being ruled as an accident. We can only be thankful," Ms. Greene added, "that the thieves apparently failed in their efforts, seeing that nothing has apparently gone missing."

“Come on,” Zane whispered, startling James out of his reading. “I’m gonna sneak out early so I can get in some practice time on the broom. Want to come along? I could use a Potter for good luck.”

James decided it would be good to swallow his pride and tag along with Zane. He even thought he might spend a little practice time on a broom himself. He folded the newspaper again and stuffed it into his backpack.

“Think you can show me how to do that hard stop and spin I saw you pulling in Basic Broom class today?” James asked Zane as they pounded up the stairs to change out of their robes.

“Sure, mate,” Zane agreed confidently. “Just don’t show it to Ralph until he can keep his broom under him while he’s floating still.”

James felt an ugly pang at the mention of Ralph’s name, but he pushed it away. Minutes later, changed into jeans and tee shirts, the two of them ran exuberantly out into the sunlight of the afternoon, heading toward the Quidditch pitch.



James spent the afternoon on the pitch with Zane, practicing his broom-handling a little, but mostly just watching the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor teams assemble and run drills. When Zane joined his team to grab some quick dinner and get into their gear, James accompanied Ted and the Gryffindors back to the common room as they changed and headed down to dinner themselves. The atmosphere before the first match of the season was always charged with excitement. The Great Hall was raucous with good-natured teasing, shouts and impromptu outbursts of House anthems. During dessert, Noah, Ted, Petra, and Sabrina, all dressed in their Quidditch jerseys, lined up along the front of the Gryffindor table, arms linked and grinning like they were about to perform a show tune. In unison, they stomped their feet on the stone floor, garnering the room’s attention, then launched into a roughly choreographed but enthusiastic Irish jig, singing a tune Damien had written for them earlier that day:

Ohhh, we Gryffindors like to make jokes and have fun,

But the Quidditch pitch with us will be overrun,

*And we hope that the Ravenclaws know that they're done,
When the lion team drops down on them like a ton.
Ohhh, the game can be tough and the body checks harsh,
And you might find your Seeker's been tossed in the marsh,
But we Gryffindors with our goodwill are not sparse,
So we'll warn you before we kick you in the—*

The last words were drowned out by the mingled roars and cheers of the Gryffindors and the boos and catcalls of the Ravenclaws. The Gremlins bowed deeply, grinning, obviously pleased with themselves, and then joined their teammates as they ran out to the Quidditch pitch for final preparations.

The first and last matches of the Quidditch season, as James knew, were always the best attended. At the end of the year, during final tournaments, everyone knew that, whichever teams were playing, they'd be exciting matches. At the beginning of the year, though, people were excited and hopeful for their own House teams. Most matches saw the grandstands filled with students and teachers, decked out in their team colors and waving flags and banners. As James entered the pitch, he was delighted to see and hear the enthusiastic crowd. Students milled and shouted to each other as they filed into their seats. The teachers mostly sat at the tops of the sections dedicated to their houses. As James climbed the stairs into the Gryffindor section, he saw his dad seated near the press box, flanked by the Ministry officials on his right and the Alma Aleron delegation on his left. Harry saw James and waved him up, smiling broadly. As James reached him, Harry orchestrated a complicated rearrangement of the seating that, while only freeing a single seat for James, required nearly everyone in the group to move. James mumbled apologies, but didn't really mind seeing the look of annoyance on Ms. Sacarhina's face, masked thinly by her omnipresent plastic smile.

"As I was saying, yes, we do have Quidditch in the States," Professor Franklyn said to Harry, his voice carrying over the dull roar of the assembling crowd, "but for some reason, it isn't quite as popular as sports like swivenhodge, grungeball or broomstick gauntlet. Our World Cup team shows some promise this year, though, or so I am told. I tend to remain skeptical."

James glanced around at the Americans, curious to see who was in attendance and what they seemed to think of the match so far. Madame Delacroix was seated on the end of the row, her face expressionless and her hands folded tightly on her lap so that they looked unpleasantly like a ball of brown knuckles. Professor Jackson glanced at James and nodded in greeting. James saw that his black leather case, with its inexplicable cargo, was sitting between his feet, securely closed this time. Professor Franklyn was dressed in what passed for his dress robes, with a high white collar and a frilly ascot at his throat, and his square spectacles which caught the light cheerfully as he looked around the grandstands.

“Where’s Ralph?” Harry asked James. “I thought I’d see him with you tonight.”

James shrugged noncommittally, avoiding his dad’s eyes.

“Ah! Here we are,” Franklyn announced, sitting up and craning to watch.

The Gryffindor team streaked out of the broad doorway at the base of their grandstand, their red cloaks snapping behind each flyer like a flag.

“The Gryffindor squadron, led by Captain Justin Kennely, is first to take the pitch,” Damien Damascus’ voice rang out stoutly from the press box.

The team pulled into a corkscrew formation that tightened as it rose, and then yanked their brooms to a halt as the players formed a large letter ‘G’ right in front of the Gryffindor section of the grandstands. Then the shape dissolved as the players broke formation, dodging around one another in a dizzying bout of aerial acrobatics, and reformed into the letter ‘P’. All the players sat up straight on their brooms, faced Harry and James, and saluted, grinning broadly. The Gryffindor grandstand applauded wildly, deafeningly, and James saw dozens of smiling and shouting faces turning to view Harry’s reaction. He waved and nodded curtly, half standing to receive the accolade.

“You’d think the Queen was in attendance,” James heard Harry mutter as he sat back down.

“And now, here come the Ravenclaws,” Damien called, his voice echoing around the pitch. “Headed by Captain Gennifer Tellus, fresh from last year’s tournament victory.”

The Ravenclaw team burst from the opposite side of the grandstand like fireworks, each flyer pulling off into a different direction, weaving through each other and tossing a Quaffle from player to player with speed that defied the eye. After several seconds of spiraling wildly and apparently randomly around the grandstands, the Ravenclaws streaked simultaneously into the center of the pitch, pulled to a sudden stop, then spun on their broomsticks to face the crowd in all directions. Each player raised their right arm, and Gennifer, in the center, held the Quaffle over her head. There was wild cheering from the Ravenclaw grandstand, and cheers of appreciation and respect from the rest.

Finally, Gennifer and Justin flew into position in the center of the pitch, nodding greetings as the teams took up formation behind their captains. Beneath them, standing in the center-mark of the pitch in his official’s tunic, Cabriel Ridcully held the Quaffle under his arm, his foot resting on the Quidditch trunk.

“I want to see a clean match,” he called up to the players. “Captains, ready? Players in formation? Annnnd...” He hefted the Quaffle in his massive palm, arm outstretched. “Quaffle in play!”

Ridcully heaved the Quaffle straight up and simultaneously lifted his foot from the Quidditch trunk. The trunk sprang open, releasing the two Bludgers and the Snitch. All four balls shot upwards, merging with the players as they exploded into motion. The grandstands erupted into cheers and wild shouting.

James remembered to look for Zane among the Ravenclaws. His blond hair wasn't hard to find against the royal blue of his cloak. He spun through a knot of players, executing a surprisingly tight barrel roll, then leaned precariously and backhanded a Bludger as it banked around the group. The Bludger missed its target, but only because Noah ducked and rolled aside at just the right moment. The crowd roared in mingled delight and disappointment.

The heat of the summer evening was unusually fierce. The lowering sun beat down on players and spectators alike. On the ground, both teams had marked out team cool down areas, one at each end of the pitch. Each area held a dozen large buckets filled with water. Occasionally, a flyer would perform a wand signal, alerting the team's cool down crew. One member of the crew would use his wand to levitate the water out of one of the buckets, so that it floated thirty feet over the pitch like a solid, wobbling bubble. Then, just as the flyer swooped into position, another crew member would point his wand at the levitating ball of water, exploding it into a cloud of droplets just as the player flew through it. The crowd laughed delightedly every time a player emerged from the rainbow-laden mist, shaking water from their hair and joining the fray again, happily refreshed.

Gryffindor took the lead early on, but Ravenclaw began a steady comeback that stretched into the evening. The sun was setting by the time Ravenclaw overtook Gryffindor, and the match took on that feverish, hectic tone that only very close games can sustain. James watched the Seekers, trying to get a glimpse of the elusive Snitch, but he couldn't see any sign of the tiny golden ball. Then, just as he looked away, there was a flash of setting sunlight on something over the Hufflepuff grandstand. James squinted, and there it was, flitting in and out of the banner poles. The Ravenclaw team's Seeker had already seen it. James shouted to Noah, the Gryffindor Seeker, jumping to his feet and pointing. Noah spun around on his broom, looking wildly. He saw the Snitch just as it angled down, directly into the melee of circling flyers and careening Bludgers.

The Ravenclaw Seeker lunged as the Snitch streaked past him. He almost fell off his broom, turned the fall into a diving loop, and doubled back toward the match. Ted, one of Gryffindor's Beaters, aimed a Bludger at Ravenclaw's Seeker, making the boy duck and weave, but not deterring him from his course. Noah was approaching from the other side of the field, ducking and banking wildly through the other flyers. The rest of the crowd caught on to what was happening. As one, the spectators leaped to their feet, shouting and cheering. And then, just at the very height of the action, James saw something else that completely distracted him from the match for the first time since it had begun.

The Muggle intruder was down on the field, standing just to the side of the Ravenclaw cool down area. James could hardly believe he was seeing it, but the man was simply standing, wearing a cast-off cloak from one of the cool down crew, staring up into the match with an expression of total awe and bewilderment. He was holding something to his eye, and James recognized vaguely that it was some sort of handheld Muggle camera. He was filming the match! James tore his gaze away from the intruder and looked up at his dad, who stood next to him, shouting happily at the end-of-game brawl. James yanked Harry's robes and yelled up at him.

“Dad! Dad, there’s someone down there!” He pointed wildly, trying to indicate the Quidditch pitch through the throng of standing, waving spectators.

Harry looked at James, still smiling, trying to hear. “What?” he yelled, leaning toward James.

“Down there!” James shouted, still pointing. “He’s not supposed to be here! He’s a Muggle! I’ve seen him here before!”

Harry’s face changed instantly. The smile snapped shut. Harry stood up to his full height and scanned the field. James glanced back down as well, searching for the Muggle intruder. He was sure he’d be gone and that James would be left looking like a fool, but the man was still there, staring up into the melee above. He had lowered his camera, James saw. It dangled from his right hand. James looked closer and saw that the man had bandages on his upper arm, and smaller bandages taped to two places on his face. He had gotten hurt crashing through the stained-glass window, but apparently not hurt enough to avoid coming back.

Harry was pushing past the American delegation, excusing himself politely but firmly, heading toward the stairs. James followed, trotting to keep up. Together, they traversed the stairs two by two, heading down to field level. James recognized that his dad was in full Auror mode now, not thinking, really, but letting instinct take over. There was no sense of panic or worry or anger, just businesslike purpose and unstoppable. Harry reached the field with James right behind him just as the game ended. There was a thunderous ovation and suddenly people were running onto the field. The cool down crews came out to collect the empty buckets. The teams began to come in for landings, dropping to the pitch like dandelion seeds. Cabe Ridcully strode across the center line, using his wand to summon the game balls. Undeterred, Harry walked purposefully toward the end of the field where he and James had seen the strange man, but now that they were on the pitch, they couldn’t see him anymore. There were too many people moving about, too much noise and confusion. James knew that there were a hundred ways the man could already have slunk away, disappearing into the spreading shadows of the hills and woods beyond the pitch.

Harry didn’t stop moving until he stood on the spot they’d seen the man standing. He turned slowly, taking in the sights from what would have been the man’s perspective.

“There,” he pointed. James looked and saw that his dad was pointing at the base of one of the grandstands, at the doorway leading into the Ravenclaws’ holding pen. “Or there. Or there,” Harry said, talking partly to James and partly to himself, indicating first the path that ran between the Hufflepuff and Slytherin grandstands and then pointing at the equipment shed. “He probably wouldn’t choose the shed, since he’d know there was no back way out. At best, it’s a hiding place, and he’d be looking to get away, not hide. The grandstand exit would just take him farther in. No, he’d choose the path, then. It’s only been two minutes. James?”

James looked up at his dad, eyes wide. “Yeah?”

“Tell the Headmistress what we saw and have Titus meet me at the entrance to that path in five minutes. Don’t run. We don’t know what this is about and we don’t need to cause any concern yet. Just walk fast and tell them what I said. OK?”

James nodded briskly, and then turned back the way he and his dad had come, reminding himself not to run. As he climbed the steps, pressing through the departing crowd, not even knowing yet who’d won the match, he realized how utterly gratified he was that his dad had believed him. In some small part of his mind, James had been worried that his dad would doubt him, perhaps even dismiss his concerns. But James had counted on the hope that his dad knew him better than that, that his dad would trust him. Harry had done just that, descending to the field to investigate the strange man without any question or hesitation. Of course, that was how Aurors worked. Investigate first, then ask questions if any are required. Still, James was extremely glad that his dad had trusted him enough to go after the man based solely on James’ word.

Despite his relief at his dad’s response, however, James was sorely disappointed that the man had gotten away so easily. Somehow, he knew that Harry and Titus would not find any sign of the man or any clue of where he’d gone. Then, James would be right back where he’d started, with nothing but the glimpse of an unknown person on the Quidditch pitch to back up his story.

Thinking that, he finally caught up to Titus Hardcastle and the rest of the group. When he gave them his messages from Harry, Titus excused himself with a word and headed briskly down the stairs, his hand in the pocket he kept his wand in. McGonagall and the Ministry officials listened to James’ explanation of the man he and Harry had seen on the field, the Headmistress with a look of stern attentiveness, Ms. Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant with looks of mild puzzlement.

“You say he had some sort of camera, dear boy?” Sacarhina asked mildly.

“Yeah, I’ve seen them before. It makes movies. He was filming the match.”

Sacarhina looked at Recreant with a strange expression that James took for disbelief. He wasn’t surprised, and he didn’t really care. He was more concerned that McGonagall believe him. He was about to tell her the man was the same man that he’d accidentally kicked through the window, but something about the expression on Sacarhina’s face made him decide to wait until they were in private.

On the way down the steps again, flanked by McGonagall, the Ministry officials, and the Alma Alerons, James finally heard the score. It turned out that Ravenclaw had won the game. James felt annoyed and deflated, but he took some comfort in knowing that at least Zane was probably having a good evening.



When they reached the path leading back to the castle, Headmistress McGonagall sidestepped out of the line.

“Professors and guests, please feel free to return to the castle on your own. I prefer to attend to this situation in person,” she said briskly and turned to cross the field. James darted to follow her. When he caught up with her, she glanced down at him.

“I suppose it would be pointless for me to tell you this is no business of a first-year student,” she said, apparently choosing, against her better judgment, not to send James up to the castle. “The Auror in charge being your father, he’d probably ask for you to be there, no less. One wonders how he is able to keep his head on straight without Miss Granger to reel him in.”

It took James a moment to realize ‘Miss Granger’ was Aunt Hermione, whose last name was now Weasley. He couldn’t help smiling at the thought that the Headmistress still tended to think of his dad and aunt and uncle as troublesome, if generally likeable, little kids.

By the time they reached the head of the path that cut between the Slytherin and Hufflepuff grandstands, Harry and Titus Hardcastle were coming back from their cursory examination of the area.

McGonagall spoke first, “Any sign of the intruder?”

“Nothing so far,” Hardcastle said gruffly. “Too dry for footprints and too dark to pick up his trail without a team or a dog.”

“Madam Headmistress,” Harry said, and James could tell his dad was still in Auror mode, “may we have your permission to conduct a broader search of the area? We’d require the help of a small crew of our choosing.”

“You believe that this individual is a threat?” the Headmistress asked Harry before answering.

Harry spread his hands and shrugged. “There’s no way of knowing without more information. But I do know that the man I saw was too old to be a student, nor did I recognize him as any of the faculty or staff. He was wearing a cloak from one of the ground crew as an attempt at disguise, so he was certainly hiding from someone, if not everyone. And James tells me he’s seen this person on the grounds before.”

Everyone looked at James. “He’s the one I told you about the other morning, ma’am,” James explained, addressing the Headmistress. “I’m sure of it. He had bandages on his arm and face. I think he got hurt when I knocked him through the window.”

“I knew that would be an interesting story,” Harry muttered, suppressing a smile.

“But certainly, Mr. Potter, Mr. Hardcastle,” McGonagall said, looking at the adults, “you realize there is no conceivable way that anyone could overcome the protective perimeter of the school. Anyone you saw simply must have been permitted to be on the grounds, otherwise...”

“You’re right, Minerva,” Harry said. “But the individual I saw didn’t act as if he believed he was permitted to be here. So the question is, if he’s been allowed in, who gave the permission, and how? These are questions I’d very much like to ask, but our only hope of doing so rest on our beginning a search of the grounds immediately.”

McGonagall met Harry’s eyes, nodded reluctantly, then more certainly. “Of course. Who do you require?”

“I’d like Hagrid, for starters. No one knows these grounds like him, and of course, we’ll want Trife. We’d like to split into three teams: Hagrid with Trife, myself leading a team into the Forbidden Forest, and Titus heading the other team around the perimeter of the lake. We’ll need more sets of eyes to watch for sign. Too bad Neville is away tonight.”

“We could summon him back,” Hardcastle commented.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think that’s necessary. We’re looking for a single individual, possibly a Muggle. All we really need are a couple people who know how to spot a trail. How about Teddy Lupin and you, James?”

James tried not to look too pleased, but a thrill of pride went through him. He nodded at his dad with what he hoped looked like duty and confidence, instead of giddy excitement.

“Does the school keep any hippogriffs at the moment, Madam?” Titus rumbled. “A view from above is what’s called for here. If the man’s been on the grounds before, he must be camped out nearby.”

“No, none at the moment, Mr. Hardcastle. We have Thestrals, of course.”

Harry shook his head. “Too light. Thestrals can only carry one person, and none as heavy as Titus or myself. Hagrid would break one right in half.”

James was thinking hard. “How high do you have to be?”

Hardcastle looked sideways at James. “Higher than man-height’s really all that matters. High enough to get a bird’s-eye view of the ground, but slow enough to be able to study it. You’ve an idea? Spill it, son.”

“What about giants?” James said after a pause. He was worried it was a stupid idea. Mostly, he was afraid of losing the respect his dad had shown him by inviting him along on the search. “There’s Grawp, who’s tall as some trees, and his new lady friend. Hagrid says she’s even bigger than your regular giant.”

Hardcastle glanced at Harry, his expression unreadable. Harry looked considering. “How fast do you think Hagrid can get them here?” he asked, addressing the question to the Headmistress.

“That’s certainly a question worth asking,” she said, a little archly, “seeing as I had no idea we now had two giants living among us. I’ll go and request their services from Hagrid personally.” She turned to James. “Go and fetch Mr. Lupin, and tell no one what you are up to. Both of you meet your father at Hagrid’s cottage with cloak and wand within fifteen minutes. I’ll need to return to the castle to see to our guests.”

“And James,” Harry said, smiling that crooked smile, “*now*, you can run.”



James was out of breath by the time he reached the common room. He found Ted still in his Quidditch jersey, moping with several other players in a corner alcove.

“Ted, come here!” James called, catching his breath. “We don’t have much time.”

“That’s no way to enter a room,” Sabrina said, turning to look at James over the back of the couch. “One might get the rather inescapable impression that you were up to something.”

“I am. We are,” James said, leaning forward, his hands on his knees. “But I can’t tell you right now. Not allowed to. Afterwards. But they want you, Ted. We’re supposed to be at Hagrid’s cabin in five minutes. Wand and cloak.”

Ted jumped up, apparently happy to forget the first loss of the season and always ready to tag along for an adventure. “Well, we all knew this day would come. Finally, my unique skills and insight are being recognized. We’ll regale you with the story of our adventure, assuming we live to tell the tale. Lead on, James.”

Ted stuffed his wand into his pocket and slung his cloak over his shoulder. As both boys strode through the portrait hole, James still panting, Ted strutting and rock-jawed, Sabrina called after them, “Bring more Butterbeers when you get back, oh mighty ones.”

On the way around the balcony, James was dismayed to see Zane wave at him from across the stairwell. He detoured to meet them at the landing.

“Hey, Ted, great game!”

Ted growled, annoyed to be reminded of it.

“Where you going?” Zane asked, trotting to keep up with James and Ted.

“Adventure and mortal peril, I’m thinking,” Ted replied. “You want to come?”

“Yeah! What’s the plan?”

“No!” James exclaimed. “Sorry. I’m not supposed to tell anyone about it but Ted. My dad said--”

Zane’s eyebrows shot up. “Your dad? Cool! Serious Auror stuff! Come on, you can’t run off to have Harry Potter-style adventures without your buddy Zane, can you?”

James stopped in the main hall, exasperated. “All right! You can follow us out, but if Dad says you have to come back in and be quiet about it, you have to. All right?”

“Woohoo!” Zane called, running ahead of them down the steps into the courtyard. “Come on, you guys. Adventure and really wild stuff awaits!”

Harry and Titus Hardcastle were standing outside Hagrid’s cabin with their wands lit by the time the three boys arrived.

“Thanks for coming, Ted,” Harry said, his face stoic. “And Zane, as well, who I hadn’t exactly expected.”

“I asked him to come, Harry,” Ted said, effecting a grave expression. “He’s new, but he’s sharp. I thought he might be of service, depending on what you’re planning.” Ted studied Zane critically. Zane wiped the grin off his face and attempted to look serious, without much success. Harry studied them both.

“Mainly, we just need eyes. Since Zane has as many of those as the rest of us, I guess he’s qualified. Let’s just hope Minerva doesn’t find out I took *another* first year into the forest or she’ll bloody well figure out a way to give us all detention. James hasn’t told you what we’re doing here tonight?”

Ted shook his head. “Nary a word. Just said it was top-secret, hush-hush stuff.”

Harry slid an eye toward James. “The Headmistress told you not to say anything, my boy.”

“I didn’t!” James protested, shooting a look at Ted. “I just said I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone what we were doing!”

“Best way to get people suspicious, James, is to tell them not to ask.” But Harry didn’t seem angry. In fact, he seemed a little amused. “No matter, though. We’ll be done and back to the castle before your Gremlin friends mount any kind of reconnaissance. Right, Ted?”

“They’re probably tucked into their beds even as we speak, Godfather,” Ted said primly. Harry rolled his eyes.

James became aware of a dull rumbling underfoot. Moments later, he heard the distant barking of Trife, Hagrid’s bullmastiff, who had long since succeeded his beloved boarhound, Fang. Everyone present turned toward the woods as the rumbling underfoot became a rhythmic pounding. After a minute, huge shapes loomed in the darkness, lumbering between the trees, their footfalls shaking the ground. Trife bounded in and out of the giants’ legs, apparently unfazed by the fact that he’d be squashed to putty if one of them accidentally stepped on him. He barked up at them excitedly, his normally substantial frame dwarfed by the plodding figures. Hagrid followed, occasionally calling at Trife to quiet down, but with no real conviction.

“Grawp was easy to bring along,” Hagrid called, stepping out of the forest. “He always wants to help. Got himself a great big heart o’ gold, he does. Gettin’ better and better with his words, too. His lady friend, though...” He dropped his voice as he approached Harry, affecting a secretive pose that James thought was about as subtle as a banshee in a matchbox. “She’s not quite so used to being around folks as Grawp is. Didn’t take too well to being woken up, either. Barely understands a word we say, but it seems best just to keep on talkin’ to her as if she does. She’ll come along all right, so long as we take it slow with her.”

James reminded himself that this was the same Hagrid who had raised Blast-Ended Skrewts for fun, and persisted in thinking that the primary characteristic of dragons was their cuteness. Any warning from Hagrid about a creature’s temperament, therefore, was definitely worth hearing. Everyone turned to greet the giants as they emerged from the trees. Grawp came first, blinking and smiling in the wand-light. He waved a piano-sized hand at Harry.

“Hullo, Harry,” Grawp’s voice was deep and slow. James had the impression that making words wasn’t quite what it had been designed for. “How Herm-ay-nown... Her-mime-nin...”

Harry tried to save Grawp the effort. “Hermione is fine, Grawp. She would say hello if she had known I’d be seeing you.”

This seemed to be more than Grawp could quite wrap his mind around. “Hullo, Herme-nimminie...” He continued working through Hermione’s name as the she-giant emerged tentatively from the forest behind him. James craned his neck, feeling an involuntary thrill of fear course down his spine. The she-giant was so tall that she had to push the canopy of the trees apart as she stepped out of the forest, cracking and snapping branches. The wand-light only reached her chest, which was roughly about the same height as Grawp’s head. Her head was merely a shadowed shape moving above the treetops, outlined against the starry sky. She moved slower than Grawp, ponderously, her great feet coming down to the ground like falling millstones, shaking leaves from the nearby trees with each step.

“So much for stealth,” Hardcastle commented, staring up at the monstrous figure.

“Harry, Titus, James, Zane, and Ted,” Hagrid called out very slowly, “meet Prechka. Prechka, these are friends.”

Prechka bent down slightly so that her head hovered over Grawp’s shoulder. She made a low, interrogative grunt that James thought actually rattled the windows in Hagrid’s cottage. Harry raised his lit wand over his head and smiled. “Prechka, Grawp, thank you both for coming and helping us. We won’t keep you long, I hope. Hagrid has explained what we are asking you to do tonight, has he?”

Grawp gathered himself to speak. “Harry look for sneaking man. Grawp and Prechka help.”

“Excellent,” Harry said, turning to address the group. “Hagrid, you take Trife and get him on the scent from the path. See if he can pick up anything leading off the trail into the forest or around the lake. If so, send up a red signal. Ted, you’ll be with me and Prechka in the forest. Zane, James, you’ll both join Titus and Grawp searching the perimeter of the lake. We’re searching for a back trail as much as we’re looking for the intruder himself, so watch for broken branches, disturbed undergrowth and ground leaves, and anything human-related, such as bits of cloth, trash, papers, or anything of that nature. Everyone clear?”

“Who’re we looking for, Harry?” Ted asked.

Harry was already approaching Prechka slowly. “We’ll know that when we find him, won’t we?”



8. THE GROTTO KEEP

Zane, James, and Hardcastle climbed onto Grawp's back as the giant squatted down. James and Zane both clambered onto a shoulder, gripping Grawp's ragged shirt for support. Hardcastle, apparently oblivious to how ridiculous it might look, straddled the back of Grawp's neck like a kid being carried by his dad. He held his lit wand up and out, spreading a halo of light onto the ground around them, and then directed Grawp toward the lake. As they left, Harry and Ted were still working out the best method to get onto Prechka's shoulders.

"Do we need a ladder, you think?" Ted called.

"Get her to bend all the way over, with her hands on the ground," Harry called, waving up to the she-giant, who had kneeled, but become distracted by Hagrid's garden. She pulled up a handful of pumpkins, roots and all, and began stuffing them into her mouth.

“That’s right, that’s right,” Hagrid called soothingly. “Just lean over here a bit. There we go. Oh!”

There was a sharp wooden crunch as Prechka leaned on Hagrid’s wagon, crushing it to kindling.

Hagrid patted the gigantic elbow, shaking his head. “Oy, at least yeh can climb up now, Harry. Just use the wall there as a step. There yeh go.”

Prechka was being coaxed upright again, Harry and Ted perched on her shoulders, when Grawp entered the woods lining the west side of the lake and all view of the Hogwarts grounds vanished behind dense, stunted trees.

Grawp was surprisingly gentle, turning sideways and ducking to avoid branches that might knock his cargo off his back. James could feel the weight of Grawp’s footsteps pressing into the ground far below, but experienced none of the shudder and thump he had expected to feel riding on a giant’s back. Hardcastle directed Grawp quietly, being seated almost right next to the giant’s ear. He led them in an orderly zigzag, approaching the lake, and then turning back into the thick of the wood again, slowly advancing around the perimeter. Their progress was slow and the motion of Grawp’s walking began to rock James into sleepiness. He shook himself awake, studying the ground below for any of the signs his dad had described. In an attempt to keep himself awake, he explained to Hardcastle and Zane how he had seen the unidentified man on the Quidditch pitch. He told them about the camera, and described the other two times he’d seen the man on the grounds.

“You’ve seen this person three times, then?” Hardcastle asked, his voice a gravelly monotone.

“Yeah,” James nodded.

“But apart from your dad tonight, no one else has seen him at all?”

James felt rankled by that, but answered directly. “No. Nobody.”

They were silent again for a while. James guessed that they had travelled approximately a third of the way around the perimeter. He saw glimpses of the castle looming over the lake whenever they neared its edge. The woods seemed annoyingly untouched and normal. Crickets buzzed and creaked, filling the night air with their strange chorus. Everywhere James looked, fireflies stitched the shadows, going about their nocturnal business. There was no sign that anyone had ever been through this wood, much less anyone recently.

“Stop, Grawp,” Hardcastle said suddenly, his voice tense. Grawp stopped obediently and stood still. His massive head turned slightly as he looked around. James peered around Grawp’s enormous, dirty ear, trying to see what Hardcastle was looking at or listening for. Half a minute crept by. James knew not to speak. Then, in the near distance, there was a harsh scurrying sound. Something scrambled, unseen, through the fallen leaves and stopped again. A branch creaked, as if it were being stepped on. James’ heart was suddenly pounding. Still, neither Grawp nor Hardcastle moved. James saw Hardcastle turn his head slightly, trying to pinpoint the direction of the sound.

It came again, nearer this time, but still unseen. It was ahead of them, behind a low rise on the woods side of their path. James couldn't help thinking that there was something distinctly inhuman about the scurrying sound. It was, somehow, too busy. The hair at the base of his neck prickled.

Hardcastle tapped the back of Grawp's head lightly and pointed toward the ground, reaching so Grawp could see his hand. James felt the giant lower, and was surprised again at the slow grace of the motion. The leaves underfoot crackled only slightly as Grawp put his hands on the ground. Hardcastle slid silently off Grawp's back. His eyes were locked on the low rise ahead.

"Stay with--"

He was interrupted by the noise of scrambling movement. It was much closer this time, and now James saw the motion of it. Dead leaves scattered into the air as a large, shadowy form scuttled over the rise, moving with horrible speed. It darted in and out of the trunks of the trees, crashing through bushes. It seemed to have far too many legs, and there was a strange bluish glow emanating from its front. It flickered wildly as the thing moved. Hardcastle leaped in front of Grawp as the thing approached. He flicked his wand with the practiced economy of a trained Auror, sending red Stunning Spells into the thrashing brush and leaves. The creature changed course, skirting around them and into a gully. The flickering blue glow marked its progress as it skittered over dead logs, retreating deeper into the wood.

"Stay with Grawp, you two," Hardcastle growled, setting off after the creature at a run. "Grawp, if anything other than me comes back, crush it." He moved with amazing agility for his size. Within fifteen seconds, neither he nor the retreating creature could be seen or heard. The two boys jumped off Grawp's shoulders to peer down into the gully.

"What *was* that?" Zane asked breathlessly.

James shook his head. "I'm not even sure I want to know. It definitely wasn't the guy we're looking for."

"I'm glad of that," Zane said with conviction.

They watched the gully that Hardcastle and the creature had vanished into. The incessant chorus of crickets and the flashing of the fireflies filled the woods again, seeming to deny that anything unusual was happening. There was no noise or movement from the gully.

"How far will he chase that thing?" Zane finally asked.

James shrugged. "Until he catches it, I guess."

"Or it catches him," Zane added, shuddering. "You know, I felt a lot better about this when we were up on the big guy's shoulders."

"Good idea," James agreed, turning. "Hey, Grawp, how about--"

He stopped. Grawp was gone. Zane and James glanced around for several seconds, both too stunned and spooked to say anything. “There!” Zane said suddenly, stabbing a finger in the direction of the lake. James looked. Grawp was just disappearing around a gigantic, moss-bearded boulder, lumbering slowly. “Come on! Don’t let him get out of sight!”

Both boys scampered after the giant, crawling over huge fallen trees and slipping on leaf-covered rocks. They rounded the house-sized boulder they had seen Grawp pass. Grawp was even further away, ducking under a leaning, dead tree.

“Where’s he going?” Zane cried exasperatedly.

“Grawp!” James called, hesitant to yell too loudly for fear of attracting any more of the horrible, scuttling creatures. The night had gone dim. Heavy, marching clouds obscured the moon, reducing the woods to a muddle of grey shadows. “Grawp, come back! What are you doing?”

For several minutes, Zane and James followed Grawp’s trail, struggling through creek beds and over tree trunks that the giant traversed in one step. Finally, they caught up to him near the edge of the lake, where a group of small, wooded islands obscured the view across the water. The air smelled damp and mossy and was dense with buzzing insects. Grawp stood under a gnarled tree, methodically plucking walnuts off the branches and popping them into his mouth, shell and all. He crunched them audibly as the boys approached, panting.

“Grawp!” Zane cried, struggling to catch his breath. “What’re you doing?”

Grawp glanced down at the sound of Zane’s voice, his expression quizzical. “Grawp hungry,” he answered. “Grawp smell food. Grawp eat and wait. Little man comes back.”

“Grawp, we’re lost now! Titus won’t even know where we are!” James said, trying to control his anger. Grawp stared at him, still crunching walnuts, his expression one of mild bewilderment.

“Never mind,” Zane said. “Let him chomp some nuts, then we’ll get him to carry us back the way we came.” He plopped onto a nearby rock and examined the scrapes and bruises he’d gotten during the chase. James grimaced in annoyance. He knew there was no point in arguing with the giant.

“All right,” he said tersely. “Grawp, just carry us back when you’re done. Got it?”

Grawp grunted agreement, pulling one of the larger tree branches down to him so that it creaked ominously.

James wandered disconsolately toward the water’s edge, pushing reeds and bushes aside. The lake looked more like a creek here, with only a narrow stretch of mossy water between the shore and one of the marshy islands. The island was wild, covered with densely packed bushes and trees. It had the look of a place that was underwater at least part of the year. Twenty feet away, a group of trees had fallen away from the

island. James assumed they'd been pried loose from their watery roots by a recent storm. The scene was remarkably ugly and foreboding in the shadowy night.

James had just decided to turn back, worried that Hardcastle would be looking for them, when the moon came out. As the silvery light spread across the woods, James stopped, a slow, gravid chill shaking him from head to toe. The crickets had fallen suddenly and completely silent. James felt rooted to the spot, frozen except for his eyes, which roamed the surrounding woods. The silence of the crickets wasn't the only change. The perpetual, myriad flashes of the fireflies had also ceased. The wood had gone completely and suddenly still in the wash of moonlight.

"James?" Zane's voice came, tentative in the sudden, oppressive silence. "Is this... you know... normal?" He joined James at the edge of the lake. "And what's the deal with *that* place?"

James glanced at Zane. "What place?" He followed Zane's eyes, and then gasped.

The island that lay just off the shore had changed. James could tell that no individual part of it was different, exactly. It was just that, what had appeared as totally random trees and bushes a minute before, now, in the silvery moonlight, looked much more like a hidden, ancient structure. There was the unmistakable suggestion of pillars and gates, buttresses and gargoyles, all crafted out of the island's natural growth as if it were a sort of incredibly complex optical illusion.

"I do *not* like the look of that joint," Zane said emphatically, his voice low.

James looked further. The group of trees that had fallen across the water, connecting the island to the shore, had changed as well. James could see that there was order to them. Two of them had fallen together so that they formed what was obviously a bridge. The bridge was even stylized, fashioned to resemble a gigantic dragon's head. A brown rock jutting from the upturned roots served as the eye. Two more trees, only half collapsed, formed the open upper jaw, jutting out over the bridge as if to snap down on anyone that attempted to cross.

James walked carefully toward the bridge.

"Hey, you're not going in there, are you?" Zane called. "That doesn't look so healthy to me."

"Come on," James said, not looking back. "You said you wanted adventure and really wild stuff."

"Well, actually I think I just want those things in little bitty doses. I had enough with that crazy monster we saw already, if you don't mind."

James skirted an outcropping of bushes and spindly trees and found himself standing at the mouth of the bridge. Closer to, it was even more perfect. There were handrails formed by fallen birches, smooth and easy to grip, and the two trees that formed the floor of the bridge were so close together, with vines and leaves packed between them, that they made an easy walking surface.

“Fine, stay here,” James said, not really blaming Zane for his reluctance. The mystery of it was strangely attractive to James, though. He stepped onto the bridge.

“Ahh, sheesh,” Zane moaned, following.

On the island side of the bridge, a complicated growth of vines and small trees had formed into a set of tall, ornate gates. Beyond them was impenetrable shadow. As James crept closer, he could see that the vines formed a recognizable pattern across the gates.

“I think it spells something,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “Look. It’s a poem, or a rune or something.”

As soon as he was able to make out the first word, the rest sprang into view, as if he’d just had to train his eye to see it. He stopped and read aloud:

*When by the light of Sulva bright
I found the Grotto Keep;
Before the night of time requite
Did wake his languid sleep.
Upon return the fretted dawn
With not a relic lossing;
Bygone a life, a new eon,
The Hall of Elders’ Crossing.*

Something about the poem made James shudder.

“What’s it mean?” Zane asked when he’d read it over twice.

James shrugged. “*Sulva* is an old word for ‘moon’. I know that. I think the first part just means you can only find this place when the moon shines on it. That’s got to be true, because when I first saw it in the dark, it just looked like some ugly old island. So this must be the Grotto Keep, whatever that is.”

Zane leaned in. “What about this part? ‘Upon return the fretted dawn’. Sounds like we’re supposed to come back when the sun comes back up, eh? Sounds pretty good to me.”

Ignoring Zane, James wrapped his hands around the gates and gave them a hard yank. They rattled woodenly, but didn't budge. The action seemed to trigger a response from the island. A sudden, creeping sound came from beneath the boys' feet. James glanced down, and then jumped backwards as tendrils of thorny vines grew up from underneath the bridge. The vines twined through the gate, weaving up it with a noise like a newspaper in a fire. The thorns were an ugly purple color, as if they might contain some sort of venom. They grew longer as James watched. After a minute, the gates were completely entwined with them, obscuring the words of the poem. The noise of their growth died away.

"Well, that settles that, then," Zane said in a strangely high voice. He was standing behind James, backing away slowly. "I think this place wants to be left alone, don't you?"

"I want to try one more thing," James said, pulling his wand out from beneath his cloak. Without really thinking about it, he aimed his wand at the gate. "*Alohomora.*"

There was a streak of golden light, and this time, the result was immediate and powerful. The gates repelled the spell, obliterating it in a burst of sparks, and the entire island seemed to shiver, to tense menacingly. There was a sound like a thousand people suddenly breathing in, and then a voice, an entirely inhuman, swarming sort of voice, spoke.

"Get... Thee... Hence!"

James stumbled backwards at the vehemence of the response, tumbling into Zane and knocking them both to the floor of the bridge. The bridge shuddered beneath them, and then James saw that the gates were swaying, leaning over them. The trees overhead, the ones that were fashioned to appear as the upper jaw of the dragon's head bridge, were creaking down, looming, their broken branches looking more and more like teeth.

"Get... Thee... *Hence!*" the island said again. The voice sounded like it was comprised of millions of tiny voices, whispering and raspy, speaking in unison.

The floor of the bridge buckled, tearing loose of the shore. The upper jaws crackled and began to collapse, ready to devour the two boys. They scrambled backwards, tumbling wildly over each other, and fell onto the weedy shore just as the bridge ripped loose. The gigantic jaws snapped and gnashed ferociously. Broken branches and bits of bark exploded from the writhing shape, peppering James and Zane as they scuttled away, their hands slipping on dead leaves and pine needles.

The ground rumbled under them. Roots began to burrow up from the dirt, tearing the earth apart. James felt the shore disintegrate beneath him. His foot slipped into a sudden hole and he yanked it out, narrowly avoiding a dirty, carrot-like root that writhed up out of it. He struggled for purchase on the collapsing shore, but it sank beneath him, dragging him back toward the water's edge. The surface of the lake roiled, rushing into the forming sinkhole. The boys' feet splashed into the muck, and it sucked at them, pulling them in. Zane grasped at the shore as he was pulled slowly into the frothing water. James groped for

purchase, but nothing seemed solid. Even the tree roots revealed by the crumbling earth grew loose and slippery under his hands, covered in a horrible slime that came off in coats.

Then, suddenly, there was Grawp. He dropped to his knees, gripping a nearby tree trunk with one hand and reaching for Zane, who was nearer, with the other. He plucked the boy from the murk and plopped him onto his shoulder. Zane grasped for a handhold on Grawp's shirt as the giant lunged down to retrieve James, who was nearly submerged in the thrashing waters. A horrible, hairy root snaked across the water and curled around James' ankle, yanking him back. He hung there, caught between Grawp's grip and that of the horrid root, and James was sure he'd be torn in half by the force of it. The root slipped on his pant leg and yanked his shoe off. James saw it twine hungrily around the shoe and pull it under the surface.

Grawp tried to stand, but roots were ripping up from the ground all around him. Huge, crackling wood tentacles twined his legs. Green vines grew with lightning speed up the thicker tentacles, sewing themselves into the fabric of his pants with tiny, threadlike roots. Grawp roared and yanked, ripping his pants and tearing the roots further out of the ground, but their combined force was too strong. They pulled him back to a kneeling position, and then lunged up, circling his waist, climbing his back and shoulders. The vines battened onto James and Zane, threatening to pull them off. Grawp roared again as one of the green vines twisted around his neck, forcing him lower, pulling him down into the sinkhole.

Just as James began to slip off Grawp's shoulder, pulled back toward the ground by a dozen muscling vines, sudden, shocking light filled the air. It was a vibrant golden green, and it was accompanied by a low humming sound. The vines and roots recoiled from the light. They loosened, repulsed by it, but were dreadfully reluctant to abandon their prey. Waves of the light washed over them, and each wave loosened the tangling mass until the smaller vines fell away as dead and the larger roots retreated, sucking back down into the earth with a nasty, gurgling noise.

Grawp, James, and Zane half fell, half crawled up the bank until they found firm ground. There they collapsed, panting and heaving, amid the dead leaves and broken branches.

When James rolled over and pulled himself to a kneeling position, there was a figure standing nearby, glowing faintly with the same golden green light that had repulsed the vines. James could see through the figure, although what he saw through it was both brightened and refracted, the way things might look if seen through a raindrop. The figure looked like a woman, very tall and very thin, in a dark green gown that fell straight from her hips and, apparently, right through the ground. Her whitish-green hair spread and flowed around her head like a corona. She was beautiful, but her face was grave.

"James Potter, Zane Walker, Grawp, son of the earth, you are in danger here. You must leave this wood. No human is safe under this canopy now."

James struggled to his feet. "Who are you? What was that?"

"I am a dryad, a spirit of the wood. I have managed to silence the Voice of the Island, but I won't be able to hold it back for long. It grows more restless with each day."

“A spirit of the wood?” Zane asked as Grawp helped him rather roughly to his feet. “The woods have a ghost?”

“I am a dryad, a tree sprite, a spirit of a single tree. All the trees in the wood have spirits, but they have been asleep for ages and ages, seeped down into the earth, almost diminished. Until now. The naiads and dryads have been awakened, though we know not why. Those few humans that once communed with the trees are gone and forgotten. Our time is past. Yet we are summoned.”

“Who summoned you?” James asked.

“We have not been able to know that, despite our greatest efforts. There is disharmony among us. Many trees remember only the saw of man, not his replanting. They are old and angry, wishing only to do harm to the world of men. They have gone over. You have experienced their wrath, though not as they would have it.”

“What do you mean they’ve ‘gone over’?” Zane asked, taking half a step closer, squinting at the dryad’s beauty. “Is it that place? The island? The... the Hall of Elder’s Crossing?”

“Man’s time is short on the earth, but we trees watch the years march past like days. The stars are motionless to you, but we watch and study the heavens as a dance,” the dryad said, her voice becoming soft, almost dreamy. “Since our awakening, the dance of the stars has become dire, showing a thousand dark destinies for the world of men, all swinging on the balance of the coming days. Only one possible destiny bears good. The rest are heavy with bloodshed and loss. Great sorrow. Dark times, full of war and greed, powerful tyrants, famines of terror. Much will be determined within the closing of this cycle. We tree folk can only watch, for now, but those of us who remain faithful to the memory of harmony between our world and the world of men, when the time comes, we will help as we can.”

James was almost hypnotized by the dryad’s voice, but he felt a rising sense of helplessness and frustration at her words. “But you said there is one chance we can avoid this war. What can we do? How can we make the one good destiny happen?”

The dryad’s face softened. Her large, liquid eyes smiled sadly. “There is no way to predict the path of a single action. It could be that you are already doing that which will bring about peace. It could also be that the very things you do to for good are the things that will result in war. You must do what you know to do, but only with an unclouded mind.”

Zane risked a derisive laugh. “Helpful stuff, there, Sensei.”

“There are greater dangers in the fabric of destinies than you yet know, James Potter,” the dryad said, slipping closer to James so that her light played across his face. “The enemy of your father, and of all who know love, is dead. But his blood beats within a different heart. The blood of your greatest enemy lives still.”

James felt his knees grow watery. He wobbled, and then threw his hand out, pressing it against a nearby tree for support. “Vol-Voldemort?” he whispered.

The dryad nodded, apparently unwilling to say the name. “His preferred plan was thwarted forever by your father. But he was infinitely crafty. He prepared a second plan. A successor, a bloodline. The heart of that bloodline beats today, at this moment, not one mile hence.”

James’ lips were trembling. “Who?” he asked in a barely audible voice. “Who is it?”

But the dryad was already shaking her head sadly. “We are prevented from knowing. Not from without, but from within. Those trees that have gone over work against us, fog our vision, keep many of us asleep. We can only know of that heartbeat, that it is there, but no more. You must beware, James Potter. Your father’s battle is over. Yours begins.”

The dryad was fading. Her eyes slipped shut and even as she drifted into nothingness, she already seemed to be asleep.

There was a creaking groan, then a splash from the island.

“Well,” Zane said with manic cheerfulness, “what say we jump back onto our giant buddy’s shoulders and make this place a memory before it does the same to us?”

The three of them met Titus Hardcastle before they were halfway back to their starting point. His face was like a thunderstorm, but all he said was, “Is everyone safe?”

“Safe enough,” Zane called down from Grawp’s shoulders. “But let me tell you, we’ve had one weird time of it.”

Grawp bent down to allow Hardcastle to climb onto his back. “It’s going around, then, isn’t it?” Hardcastle grunted.

Zane held a hand out, intending to help Hardcastle climb up and almost getting yanked from his seat instead. “So what was that thing you were chasing, anyway?” he said, puffing.

“Spider. One of old Aragog’s kin, no doubt. They’ve grown dumb in the last decade or two, but that one had gone and found himself a toy.” Hardcastle held something up, and James saw that it was the little handheld video camera that the intruder had been using on the Quidditch pitch. “It was still working when I caught up to the brute, the little screen all lit up. Got broken when I, er, dispatched the beast. At least it’d had a good last meal.”

James shuddered involuntarily as Grawp began to make his way back through the woods. “You really think it... ate the guy?”

Hardcastle set his jaw. “Circle of life, James. Strictly speaking, though, spiders don’t eat people. They just suck their juices out. Ugly way to go, but at least he’s not a problem anymore.”

James didn’t say so, but he had a feeling that the real problems were just beginning.



Wednesday morning, James felt sluggish and prickly as he entered the Great Hall for breakfast. It was a thoroughly glum morning, with a low, bruised sky filling the top portion of the Hall and a fine mist speckling the windows. Ralph and Zane were seated at the Slytherin table, Zane blowing on his traditional morning coffee and Ralph attacking an orange with a butter knife, sawing through it, peel and all. They didn't appear to be talking much. Zane wasn't typically a morning person, and he had been out just as late as James had been. Neither Zane nor Ralph looked up, and James was glad. He was still angry and disgusted with Ralph. Under that, though, he was sad and hurt about the boy's betrayal. He tried not to feel resentment toward Zane for sitting with Ralph, but he was too tired to make much of an effort, and the mood of the morning wasn't helping.

James made his way to the Gryffindor table, glancing up at the dais as he went. Neither his dad nor Titus Hardcastle were anywhere to be seen. James figured that, despite the lateness of the previous night, they had still risen and breakfasted shortly after dawn and were already about their morning's business. The thought that his dad's and Titus' day was already well underway, probably full of exciting meetings and secret intrigues, while he was just now having breakfast on his way to a day of gloomy classes and homework, filled him with melancholy. He found a seat surrounded by happily babbling Gryffindors, plopped into it, and began to eat methodically, joylessly.

The night before, James had been up with Titus Hardcastle, his dad, and Headmistress McGonagall for almost two hours after their return from the perimeter of the lake. Titus had sent up a wand signal as soon as they'd reached the castle, summoning Harry, Ted, Prechka, and Hagrid back from their forays. When they'd all assembled again by Hagrid's cottage, the Headmistress dismissed Grawp and Prechka, thanking them both formally, and offering them a barrel of Butterbeer for their efforts. After that, the group convened in Hagrid's cottage, congregated around the huge, rough table, drinking Hagrid's tea, which was suspiciously cloudy and brown and tasted vaguely medicinal, and avoiding some rather stale biscuits.

Hardcastle had spoken first. He explained to everyone present how he had first heard the spider, and then pursued it, leaving James and Zane in the protection of Grawp. Harry had shifted in his seat, but refrained from comment. After all, he had been the one to request that James go along on the expedition, and had consented, albeit reluctantly, to Zane's accompaniment. The Headmistress had pointed a rather long and

penetrating glare at Harry when she'd seen Zane enter the cottage. Now McGonagall turned to Hardcastle, asking how he'd managed to kill the spider.

Hardcastle's beady eyes glinted a little as he said, "Best way to kill a spider that won't fit under your boot is to get its legs off. First one's the hardest. After that, it gets easier and easier."

Hagrid wiped a hand over his face. "Poor ol' Aragog. If he'd lived to see his young turn wild, it'd have killed him. Poor fellow was just doing what spiders do. You can hardly blame him."

"The spider had the intruder's camera," Harry said, glancing down at the broken object on the table. The lens was shattered and the little screen on the back was cracked. "So we know the man escaped via the lake woods."

"Nasty way to go, whoever he may have been," McGonagall said.

Harry's expression didn't change. "We don't know for certain that the spider caught the man."

"Seems unlikely the thing asked to borrow his camera so it could make home movies of its kids, doesn't it?" Hardcastle rumbled, "Spiders aren't the polite type. They're the hungry type."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "You're probably right, Titus. Still, there's always the chance the intruder dropped the camera and the spider simply found it. It wouldn't hurt to increase security for a while, Minerva. We don't yet know how this person got in or who he was. Until we learn those things, we have to assume there is an ongoing risk of breach."

"I'm particularly interested in knowing how this camera managed to operate within the grounds," the Headmistress sniffed, staring hard at the device on the table. "It is well-known that Muggle equipment of this sort doesn't work inside the school's magical environment."

"That is indeed well-known, Madam Headmistress," Hardcastle rumbled, "but very little understood. The Muggles are endlessly inventive with their tools. What once was true may not be so anymore. And we all know that the protective spells erected around the grounds since the Battle are not quite as perfect as those maintained by old Dumbledore, God rest his soul."

James thought of Ralph's GameDeck, but decided not to mention it. The broken video camera was all the proof they needed that at least some modern Muggle devices worked on the school grounds.

Finally, attention turned to James and Zane. James explained how Grawp had wandered away in search of food, and how the two boys had chased him, finding him by the lake and the marshy island. Zane chimed in then, describing the mysterious island and the bridge. He carefully glossed over the part where James had tried to open the gates using magic, and James was glad. It had seemed foolish the very moment he'd done it, and he regretted it. Still, at the time, it had felt so natural. They took turns telling of the enchanted dragon's head bridge that attempted to eat them, then the attacking vines that had almost pulled them all into the sinkhole. Finally, James explained the tale of the tree sprite.

“Naiads and dryads?” Hagrid exclaimed incredulously. James and Zane stopped, blinking at him. Hagrid went on, “Well, they’re not for real, are they? They’re just stories and myth. Aren’t they?” He addressed the last question to the adults present.

“The lake woods are just an extension of the Forbidden Forest,” Harry said. “If there is a place where things like the naiads and dryads can exist, it’d be there. Still, if it’s true, they haven’t been seen for hundreds of years. Of course we’d think of them as myth.”

“What do you mean, ‘if it’s true?’” James asked, a little louder than he’d intended to. “We saw her. She spoke to us.”

“Your father is being an Auror, James,” McGonagall said placatingly. “All possibilities must be considered. You were all under a great deal of stress. It isn’t that we don’t believe you. We must simply determine the most likely explanation for what you saw.”

“Seems like the most likely explanation to *me* is that she was what she said she was,” James muttered under his breath.

James purposely hadn’t told his dad or any of the other adults the last thing the sprite had said, the part about the successor, the blood of the enemy beating in another heart. Part of his reluctance was in his remembrance of his dad’s stories of how the wizarding world had treated him, Harry Potter, when he’d returned from the Triwizard Tournament maze with the tale of Voldemort’s return, how he had been doubted and discredited. Another part of it was that his dad wasn’t even prepared to believe the part about the dryad. If he doubted that, how could he accept that the dryad had predicted a new kind of Voldemort’s return, through an heir, a bloodline? But the thing that had finally determined James not to tell was his memory of the very last words the dryad had spoken: *Your father’s battle is over. Yours begins.*

The conversation had droned on long after all the details had been described and discussed, long after James had grown bored with it. He wanted to get back so that he could sleep, but more than that, he wanted time to think about what the dryad had said. He wanted to work out what the island was for, what the poem on the gate meant. He worked to remember it, itching to write it down while it was still fresh in his mind. He was sure, somehow, that it all fit in with the story of Austramaddux and the secret plot of the Slytherins to bring back Merlin and start a final war with the Muggle world. He wasn’t even asking himself anymore if it was true. It *had* to be true, and it was up to him to prevent it.

Finally, the adults finished talking. They had determined that the mysterious island, while obviously dangerous, was just one of the many mysterious and inexplicable dangers that made the Forbidden Forest forbidden. The primary concern was still discovering how the intruder had gotten in, and making sure no one else was able to do it again. With that resolution, the meeting broke up.

Headmistress McGonagall had accompanied James, Zane, and Ted back to the castle, instructing them to do their best to keep the discussions of the night a secret.

“Especially you, Mr. Lupin,” she said sternly. “The last thing we need is you and your band of hooligans running off into the woods in the middle of the night attempting to duplicate Mr. Potter’s and Mr. Walker’s experiences.”

Fortunately, Ted knew enough not to try to deny the possibility of such a thing. He merely nodded and said, “Yes, ma’am.”



James only saw his dad once more during his visit, and that was after classes that evening, just as Harry, Titus, and the Ministry officials were preparing to leave. Neville had returned to Hogwarts that afternoon, and he chaperoned James to the Headmistress’ office to say goodbye to Harry and the rest. The group planned to travel via the Floo Network, as they had arrived, and had decided upon the Headmistress’ fireplace for their departure since it was the most secure. If it struck Neville odd that the office now belonged to his former teacher, who he’d known as *Professor McGonagall*, instead of to Albus Dumbledore, he didn’t let on. But he did pause for a moment next to the portrait of the former headmaster.

“Off again, is he?” he asked Harry.

“I think he generally just sleeps here. Dumbledore’s got portraits all over the place,” Harry sighed. “Not to mention all his old Chocolate Frog cards. He still shows up in them sometimes just for fun. I keep mine in my wallet, just in case.” He pulled his wallet out and slipped a dog-eared card out of it. The portrait space was empty. Harry grinned at Neville as he put it back.

Neville moved to the group congregated around the fireplace. Harry squatted down next to James.

“I wanted to thank you, James.”

James hid the look of pride that surfaced on his face. “I was just doing what you asked us to do.”

“I don’t just mean coming along with us and helping us find out what happened,” Harry said, putting a hand on James’ shoulder. “I mean for spying the intruder on the field and pointing him out to me. And for being alert enough to see him the other times. You’ve got a sharp eye and an alert mind, my boy. I shouldn’t be surprised, and I’m not.”

James grinned. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Don’t forget what we talked about the other night, though. Remember?”

James remembered. “I won’t be saving the world single-handedly.” *I’ll have at least Zane’s help*, he thought, but didn’t say, *and maybe Ted’s, too, now that Ralph’s abandoned me*.

Harry hugged his son, and James hugged him back. They grinned at each other, Harry with his hands on James’ shoulders, and then he stood, leading James over to the fireplace.

“Tell Mum I’m doing good and eating my vegetables,” James instructed his dad.

“And are you?” Harry asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Well, yes and no,” James said, a bit uncomfortable as everyone looked at him.

“Make it true and I’ll tell her,” Harry said, removing his glasses and tucking them into his robe.

Moments later, the room was empty but for James, Headmistress McGonagall, and Neville.

“Professor Longbottom,” the Headmistress said, “I suspect it’d be best for me to inform you of all that has happened these past twenty hours.”

“You mean regarding the campus intruder, Madam?” Neville asked.

The Headmistress looked markedly taken aback. “I see. Perhaps I might simply be repeating myself, then. Do tell me what you’ve already heard, Professor.”

“Merely that, Madam. Word amongst the students is that a man was seen or captured on the Quidditch pitch yesterday. The common theory is that he was a representative of the gambling community either reporting on or influencing the match. Pure rubbish, of course, but I assume it’s better to let tongues wag and inflate the tale to something ridiculous than to deny anything.”

“Mr. Potter would no doubt agree with you,” the Headmistress said pointedly. “Although, since I will be requiring your services in increasing the security of the grounds, I should explain to you precisely what did occur. James, you are free to wait a moment, aren’t you? I shall not detain the professor for long, and he will accompany you down to the corridor.” Without waiting for a reply, she turned back to Neville, launching into a detailed account of the previous night.

James knew the whole story, of course, but still felt he was meant to wait near the door, as far from earshot as possible. It was uncomfortable and vaguely annoying. He felt rather proprietary about the intruder, having been the first to see him, and having been the one to point him out on the Quidditch pitch. It was just like adults to deny something a kid said, then, when it proved true, to completely take over and dismiss the kid. He realized that this was another part of why he hadn’t yet told any adults about his suspicions concerning the Slytherin-Merlin plot. He felt even stronger now about keeping that his secret, at least until he could prove something substantial.

James crossed his arms and hovered near the door, turning to look back at Neville, who was seated in front of the Headmistress' desk, and McGonagall, who was pacing slightly behind it as she spoke.

"What are you up to, Potter?" a low voice drawled behind James, making him jump. He spun around wildly, eyes wide. The voice cut him off before he could respond. "Don't ask who I am and don't waste my time with a load of pointless lies. *You* know exactly who I am. And *I* know, even more than your own father, that you are *up* to something."

It was, of course, the portrait of Severus Snape. The dark eyes probed James coldly, the mouth turned down into a knowing sneer.

"I'm...", James began, and then stopped, feeling very strongly that if he lied, the portrait would know. "I'm not going to tell."

"A more honest answer than any ever provided by your father, at least," Snape drawled, keeping his voice low enough not to attract the attention of McGonagall or Neville. "It's a pity I'm not still alive to be headmaster or I'd find ways of getting the tale from you, one way... or another."

"Well," James whispered, feeling a little braver now that shock had worn off, "I guess it's a good thing you aren't headmaster anymore, then." He thought it might be a bit too much to say *it's a good thing you're dead*. James' dad had a load of respect for Severus Snape. He'd even made Severus Albus' middle name.

"Don't try the smart tactic with me, Potter," the portrait said, but more tiredly than angrily. "You, unlike your father, know well enough now that I was as devoted to Albus Dumbledore and the downfall of Voldemort as was he. Your father believed it was up to him to win battles entirely on his own. He was foolish and destructive. Don't think I didn't see that very same look in *your* eye not five minutes ago."

James couldn't think what to say. He just met the portrait's dark gaze and frowned stubbornly.

Snape sighed theatrically. "Have it your way, then. Like Potter, like son. Never learning the lessons of the past. But know this: I will be watching you, as I did your father. If your *unnamed* suspicions are, against all probability, accurate, be assured that I will be working toward the same end as you. Try, Potter, not to make the same mistakes as your father. Try not to leave others to pay the consequences for your arrogance."

That last stung James to the core. He assumed Snape would leave his portrait frame after a salvo like that, confident of having had the last word, but he didn't. He stayed, that same penetrating stare on his face, reading James like a book. Still, there wasn't anything specifically malicious in that gaze, despite the pointed words.

"Yeah," James finally found the voice to say. "Well, I'll keep that in mind." It was a lame response and he knew it. He was only eleven, after all.

“James?” Neville said behind him. James turned and looked up at the professor. “Sounds like you had an exciting night last night. I’m curious about the vines that attacked you. Maybe you could tell me more about them sometime, yes?”

“Sure,” James said, his lips feeling numb. When he turned back toward the door, following Neville out, the portrait of Snape was still occupied. The eyes followed him darkly as he left the room.



9. THE DEBATE BETRAYAL

As James became more familiar with the routine of school, time seemed to slip past almost without his noticing. Zane continued to excel at Quidditch, and James continued to feel an uncomfortable mix of emotions about Zane's success. He still felt the stab of jealousy when he heard the crowd cheer for one of Zane's well-hit Bludgers, but he couldn't help smiling at how much the boy loved the sport, how he delighted in each match, in the teamwork and camaraderie. Also, James was growing increasingly confident of his own broom skills. He practiced with Zane on the Quidditch pitch many evenings, asking Zane for tips on technique. Zane, for his part, was always enthusiastic and supportive, telling James that he'd definitely make the Gryffindor team next year.

"Then I'll have to stop practicing with you and giving you pointers, you know," Zane said, flying next to James and calling over the roar of the air. "It'd be like consorting with the enemy." As usual, James couldn't tell if Zane was joking or not.

James enjoyed becoming more confident on the broom, but he was surprised to discover that he loved football. Tina Curry had divided all of her classes into teams and arranged a casual game schedule for them to play against one another. Many students had grasped the essential concepts of the game and being competitive at heart, had worked to make the class-time matches interesting. Occasionally, a student would forget the non-magical nature of the sport and would be seen frantically searching their pockets for their wands or simply pointing at the ball and yelling something like "*Accio football!*", resulting in a general

breakdown of the match while everyone laughed. Once, a Hufflepuff girl had simply grabbed the ball in both hands, forgetting the basic rules of the game, and charged down the field as if she were playing rugby. James discovered, rather reluctantly, that Professor Curry's assessment of his skills had been fairly accurate. He was a natural. He could control the ball easily with the tips of his trainers as he zigged and zagged down the field. His ball-handling was regarded as among the best of any of the new players, and his scoring rate was second only to fifth-year Sabrina Hildegard, who, like Zane, was Muggle-born and unlike Zane, had played on Muggle leagues when she was younger.

James and Ralph, however, barely talked. James' initial anger and resentment had simmered down to a stubborn aloofness. Some small part of him knew that he should forgive Ralph, and even apologize for yelling at him that day in the Great Hall. He knew that if he'd kept his cool, Ralph probably would have seen the error of siding with his Slytherin housemates. Instead, Ralph seemed to feel it was his duty to support the Slytherins and the Progressive Element as earnestly as he could. If it wasn't for the fact that even Ralph's enthusiastic support was rather weak-willed and doleful, James would have found it easier to stay angry at him. Ralph wore the blue badges, and he attended the debate meetings in the library, but he did so with such a dogged attitude of obligation that it seemed to do more harm than good. If any of the Slytherins actually spoke to him, he'd jerk upright and respond with manic eagerness, then deflate as soon as they turned their attention elsewhere. It hurt James a little to watch it, but not enough to make him change his attitude toward Ralph.

In his room at night or in a corner of the library, James would study the poem he and Zane had seen on the gate to the Grotto Keep. With Zane's help, he had written it down from memory and was confident it was accurate. Still, he couldn't seem to make much of it. All he knew for sure was that the first two lines referred to the fact that the Grotto Keep could only be found by moonlight. The rest was a puzzle. He kept fetching up on the line that read 'Did wake his languid sleep', wondering if that could refer to Merlin. But Merlin wasn't asleep, was he?

"Makes it sound like he's Rip Van Winkle," Zane whispered one day in the library. "Snoozing away a few hundred years out under a tree somewhere." Zane had had to explain the fairy tale of Rip Van Winkle, and James considered it. He knew from hearing his dad's conversations with other Aurors that much of Muggle mythology came from long, distant encounters with witches and wizards. Stories of wizarding lore made their way into Muggle fairy tales, became stylized or altered, and grew into legends and myth. Perhaps, James mused, this story of the long sleeper, who awoke hundreds of years later, was a Muggle echo of the story of Merlin. Still, it didn't get James or Zane any closer to figuring out how Merlin could possibly return after so many centuries, nor did it offer any clues as to who might be involved in such a conspiracy.

At night, as he was drifting to sleep, James often found his thoughts returning, strangely enough, to his conversation with the portrait of Severus Snape. Snape had said he'd be watching James, but James couldn't imagine how that could be. There was only one portrait of Snape on the Hogwarts grounds, as far as James knew, and it was up in the Headmistress' office. How could Snape possibly be watching James? Snape had been a powerful wizard, and a potions genius according to Dad and Mum, but how would either of those

things allow his portrait to see around the castle? Still, James didn't doubt Snape. If Snape said he was watching him, James felt confident that, somehow or other, it was true. It was only after two weeks of mulling over the conversation he'd had with Snape that James realized what struck him most about it. To Snape, unlike James and the rest of the wizarding world, it was a foregone conclusion that James was just like his father. "Like Potter, like son," he'd said, sneering. Ironically, though, to Snape, if no one else, this was not precisely a good thing.

As the leaves in the Forbidden Forest began to settle into the browns and yellows of autumn, the blue Progressive Element buttons were augmented by the posters and banners for the first All-School Debate. As Ralph had predicted, the theme was 'Re-evaluating the Assumptions of the Past: Truth or Conspiracy'. As if the words themselves weren't enough, the right side of each banner and poster bore a drawing of a lightning bolt that was enchanted to shift into the shape of a question mark every few seconds. Zane, who, according to Petra, was quite good at debate, told James that the school debate committee had argued for quite some time about the topic of the first event. Tabitha Corsica was not on the debate committee, but her crony, Philia Goyle, was the committee chair.

"So in the end," Zane had reported to James, "the debate team turned out to be a great example of democracy in action: *they* argued all night, then *she* chose." He shrugged wearily.

The sight of the signs and banners, and especially, that very unambiguous lightning bolt, made James' blood boil. Seeing Ralph on a ladder finishing hanging one of the banners just outside the door to Technomancy class was more than he could take.

"I'm surprised you can reach like that, Ralph," James said, anger pushing the words out, "what with Tabitha Corsica's hand so far up your backside."

Zane, who'd been walking next to James, sighed and ducked into the classroom. Ralph hadn't noticed James until he spoke. He glanced down, his expression surprised and wounded. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"It means, I'd think by now, you'd have gotten sick of being her little first-year puppet." James already regretted saying anything. The guileless misery on Ralph's face shamed him.

Ralph had the mantra down well, though. "*Your* people are the puppetmasters, preying on the fears of the weak-minded to maintain the demagoguery of prejudice and unfairness," he said, but without much conviction. James rolled his eyes and walked into the classroom.

Professor Jackson was absent from his usual spot behind the teacher's desk. James sat next to Zane in the front row. As he sat down, he made a point of joking and laughing with a few other Gryffindors nearby, knowing Ralph was watching through the doorway. The mean pleasure it gave him was hollow and raw, but it was pleasure nonetheless.

Finally, the room hushed. James looked up and saw Professor Jackson entering, carrying something under his arm. The object was large, flat, and wrapped in cloth.

“Good morning, class,” he said in his usual, brusque manner. “Your last week’s essays are graded and on my desk. Mr. Murdock, would you mind distributing them, please? On the whole, I am not terribly disappointed, although I think most of you can be relieved that Hogwarts does not generally grade on the curve.”

Jackson carefully set his parcel on the desk. As he unfolded the cloth from around it, James could see that it was a stack of three rather small paintings. He thought of the painting of Severus Snape and his attention perked up.

“Today is a day for taking notes, I can assure you,” Jackson said ominously. He arranged the paintings in a row along the shelf of the chalkboard. The first painting was of a thin man with owlish glasses and an almost perfectly bald head. He blinked at the class, his expression alert and slightly nervous, as if he expected someone, at any moment, to jump up and shout “Boo!” at him. The next painting was empty but for a rather bland wooded background. The last showed a fairly ghastly clown in white face with a hideously large, red smile painted over its mouth. The clown leered inanely at the class and shook a little cane with a ball on the end. The ball, James noticed with a shudder, was a tiny version of the clown’s own head, grinning even more insanelly.

Murdock finished handing back everyone’s papers and slid back into his own seat. James glanced down at his essay. On the front, in Jackson’s perfect, left-slanting cursive, were the words, *Tepid, but borderline cogent. Grammar needs work.*

“As always, questions about your grades may be submitted to me in writing. Further discussion will be obtained, as needed, during my office hours, assuming any of you remember where my office is. And now, onward and upward.” Jackson paced slowly along the line of paintings, gesturing vaguely at them. “As many of you will recall, in our first class, we had a short discussion, spearheaded by Mr. Walker,” he peered beneath his bushy eyebrows in Zane’s direction, “about the nature of magical art. I explained that the artist’s intentions are imbued on the canvas via a magical, psycho-kinetic process, which allows the art to take on a semblance of motion and attitude. The result is a drawing that moves and mimics life at the whim of the artist. Today, we will examine a different kind of art, one that represents life in a wholly different way.”

Quills scratched feverishly as the class struggled to keep up with Jackson’s monologue. As usual, Jackson paced as he spoke.

“The art of magical painting comes in two forms. The first one is just a more lavish version of what I illustrated in class, which is the creation of purely fanciful imagery based on the imagination of the artist. This is different from Muggle art only inasmuch as the magical versions may move and emote, based on the intention--and only within the imaginative boundaries--of the artist. Our friend, Mr. Biggles here, is an example.” Jackson gestured at the painting of the clown. “Mr. Biggles, thankfully, never existed outside the imagination of the artist who painted him.” The clown responded to the attention, bobbing in its frame,

wagging the fingers of one white-gloved hand and waving the cane in the other. The tiny clown's head on the end of the cane ran its tongue out and crossed its eyes. Jackson glared at the thing for a moment, and then sighed as he began to pace again.

“The second type of magical painting is much more precise. It depends on advanced spellwork and potion-mixed paints to recreate a living individual or creature. The technomantic name for this type of painting is *imago aetasperculum*, which means... can anyone tell me?”

Petra raised her hand and Jackson nodded at her. “It means, I think, something like a living mirror image, sir?”

Jackson considered her answer. “Half credit, Miss Morganstern. Five points to Gryffindor for effort. The most accurate definition of the term is ‘a magical painting that captures a living imprint of the individual it represents, but confined within the *aetas*, or timeframe, of the subject's own lifetime’. The result is a portrait that, while not containing the living essence of the subject, mirrors every intellectual and emotional characteristic of that subject. Thus, the portrait does not learn and evolve beyond the subject's death, but retains exactly that subject's personality as strictly defined by his or her lifetime. We have Mr. Cornelius Yarrow here as an example.”

Jackson now indicated the thin, rather nervous man in the portrait. Yarrow flinched slightly at Jackson's gesture. Mr. Biggles capered frantically in his frame, jealous for attention.

“Mr. Yarrow, when did you die?” Jackson asked, passing the portrait on his way around the room again.

The portrait's voice was as thin as the man in it, with a high, nasal tone. “September twentieth, nineteen forty-nine. I was sixty-seven years and three months old, rounding up, of course.”

“And what--as if I needed to ask--was your occupation?”

“I was Hogwarts school bursar for thirty-two years,” the portrait answered with a sniff.

Jackson turned to look at the painting. “And what do you do now?”

The portrait blinked nervously. “Excuse me?”

“With all the time you now have on your hands, I mean. It's been a long time since nineteen forty-nine. What do you do with yourself, Mr. Yarrow? Have you developed any hobbies?”

Yarrow seemed to chew his lips, obviously mystified and worried by the question. “I... hobbies? No hobbies, as such. I... I always just liked numbers. I tend to think about my work. That's what I always did when I wasn't figuring the books. I thought about the budgets, the numbers, and worked them out in my head.”

Jackson maintained eye contact with the painting. “You still think about the numbers? You spend your time working out the books for the school budget as it stood in nineteen forty-nine?”

Yarrow’s eyes darted back and forth over the class. He seemed to feel he was being trapped somehow. “Er. Yes. Yes, I do. It’s just what I do, you understand. What I always did. I see no reason to stop. I’m the bursar, you see. Well, *was*, of course. The bursar.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Yarrow. You’ve illustrated my point precisely,” said Jackson, resuming his circuit of the room.

“Always happy to be of service,” Yarrow said a little stiffly.

Jackson addressed the class again. “Mr. Yarrow’s portrait, as some of you probably know, normally hangs in the corridor just outside the Headmistress’ office, along with many other former school staff members and faculty. We have, however, come into possession of a second portrait of Mr. Yarrow, one that normally hangs in his family’s home. The second portrait, as you may guess, is here in the center of our display. Mr. Yarrow, if you please?” Jackson gestured at the empty portrait in the center.

Yarrow raised his eyebrows. “Hm? Oh. Yes, of course.” He shifted, stood, brushed some nonexistent flecks of lint off his natty robes, and then stepped carefully out of the portrait frame. For a few seconds, both portraits stood empty, then Yarrow appeared in the center portrait. He was wearing slightly different clothes in this portrait, and when he sat, he was turned at an angle, showing the prow of his nose in profile.

“Thank you again, Mr. Yarrow,” Jackson said, leaning against his desk and crossing his arms. “Although there are exceptions, typically, a portrait only becomes active upon the death of the subject. Technomancy cannot explain to us why this should be, except that it seems to respond to the law of Conservation of Personalities. In other words, one Mr. Cornelius Yarrow at any given moment is, cosmically speaking, sufficient.” There was a murmur of suppressed laughter. Yarrow frowned as Jackson continued. “Another factor that comes into play once the subject is deceased is the interactivity between portraits. If there is more than one portrait of an individual, the portraits become connected, sharing a common subject. The result is one *mutual* portrait that can maneuver at will between its frames. For instance, Mr. Yarrow can visit us at Hogwarts, and then return to his home portrait as he wishes.”

James struggled to write all of Jackson’s comments down, knowing the professor was notorious for creating test questions out of the least detail of a lecture. He was distracted from the task, however, by thoughts of the portrait of Severus Snape. James risked raising his hand.

Jackson spied him and his eyebrows rose slightly. “A question, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, sir. Can a portrait ever leave its own frames? Can it, maybe, go over into a different painting?”

Jackson studied James for a moment, his eyebrows still raised. “Excellent question, Mr. Potter. Let us find out, shall we? Mr. Yarrow, may I beg your service once more?”

Yarrow was trying to maintain the pose of his second portrait, which was studious and thoughtful, looking slightly away. His eyes slid to the side, looking out at Jackson. "I suppose so. How else may I help?"

"Are you aware of the painting of the rather odious Mr. Biggles in the frame next to you?"

Mr. Biggles responded to the mention of his name by feigning great shock and shyness. He covered his mouth with one hand and batted his eyes. The tiny clown's head on the end of the cane goggled and blew raspberries. Yarrow sighed. "I am aware of that painting, yes."

"Would you be so kind as to step into his painting for just a moment, sir?"

Yarrow turned to Jackson, his watery eyes magnified behind his spectacles. "Even if that were possible, I don't believe I could bring myself to join his company. I'm sorry."

Jackson nodded, closing his eyes respectfully. "Thank you, yes, I don't blame you, Mr. Yarrow. No, we can see, therefore, that while a much stronger magic is required to create the *imago aetaspeculum*, it isn't designed to allow the portrait to enter a painting of a purely imaginary subject. It would be, in a sense, like trying to force yourself through a drawing of a door. On the other hand, Mr. Biggles?" The clown jumped up ecstatically at the mention of its name again, then looked at Jackson with a caricature of intense attention. Jackson spread an arm toward the middle frame. "Please join Mr. Yarrow in his portrait, won't you?"

Cornelius Yarrow looked shocked, then horrified, as the clown leaped out of its own painting and into his. Mr. Biggles landed behind Yarrow's chair, grabbing it and nearly rocking Yarrow out of it. Yarrow spluttered as Biggles leered forward, his head over Yarrow's left shoulder, the miniature clown's head cane over his right, blowing raspberries into the man's ear.

"Professor Jackson!" Yarrow exclaimed, his voice rising an octave and trembling on the verge of inaudibility. "I insist you remove this... this fevered imagining from my portrait at once!"

The class erupted into gales of laughter as the clown leaped over Yarrow's shoulder and landed on his lap, throwing both arms around the man's skinny neck. The clown's head cane kissed Yarrow repeatedly on the nose. "Mr. Biggles," Jackson said loudly, "that's enough. Please return to your own painting."

The clown seemed disinclined to obey. He threw himself off Yarrow's lap and hid elaborately behind the man's chair. Biggles' eyes peeped over Yarrow's right shoulder, the miniature head peeped over his left. Yarrow turned and swatted at the clown prissily, as if it were a spider he was loath to touch but anxious to kill. Jackson produced his wand--a twelve-inch length of hickory--from his sleeve and pointed it carefully at the clown's empty frame. "Shall I alter your environment while you are away, Mr. Biggles? You'll need to return to it eventually. Would you prefer to find it stocked with a few more Japanese Thorn Thickets?"

The clown frowned petulantly under its make-up and stood. Sulking, it clambered out of Yarrow's portrait and back into its own frame.

“A simple rule of thumb,” Jackson said, watching the clown give him a very enthusiastic nasty look. “A one-dimensional personality can merge into a two-dimensional personality’s environment, but not the other way around. Portraits are confined to their own frames, while imaginary subjects can move freely into and through any other painting in their general vicinity. Does that answer your question, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, sir,” James answered, then rushed on. “One more thing, though. Can a portrait ever appear in more than one of its frames at once?”

Jackson smiled at James while simultaneously furrowing his brow. “Your inquisitiveness on the subject knows no bounds, it seems, Mr. Potter. As a matter of fact, that is possible, although it is a rarity. For great wizards, whose portraits have been duplicated many times, there has been known to be some division of the personality, allowing the subject to appear in multiple frames at once. Such is the case with your Albus Dumbledore, as you might guess. This phenomenon is very difficult to measure and, of course, depends entirely on the skill of the witch or wizard whose likeness appears in the portrait. Is that all, Mr. Potter?”

“Professor Jackson, sir?” a different voice asked. James turned to see Philia Goyle near the back, her hand raised.

“Yes, Miss Goyle,” Jackson said, sighing.

“If I understand correctly, the portrait knows everything that the subject knew, yes?”

“I believe that is apparent, Miss Goyle. The painting reflects the personality, knowledge, and experiences of the subject. No more and no less.”

“Does a portrait, then, make its subject immortal?” Philia asked. Her face, as always, was stoic and impassive.

“I am afraid you are confusing what *appears* to be with what is, Miss Goyle,” Jackson said, eyeing Philia closely, “and that is a dreadful mistake for a witch to make. Much of magic, and much of life in general, I might add, is concerned primarily with illusion. The ability to separate illusion from reality is one of the fundamental basics of technomancy. No, a portrait is merely a representation of the once-living subject, no more alive than your own shadow where it falls on the ground. It can in no way be thought to prolong the life of the deceased subject. Despite all appearances, a wizard portrait is still merely paint on canvas.”

As Jackson finished speaking, he turned toward the painting of Mr. Biggles. With one swift movement, he pointed his wand at the painting, not even quite looking at it. A jet of clear, yellowish liquid spurted from the end of the wand and splashed on the canvas. Instantly, it dissolved the paint. Mr. Biggles stopped moving as his image blurred, then ran freely down the canvas. The unmistakable smell of turpentine filled the room. The class was deadly quiet.

Professor Jackson walked slowly behind his desk. “I fancied myself a bit of an artist when I was younger,” he said, studying the end of his wand as he turned. “Mr. Biggles, horrid as he was, was one of my better works. You may freely guess what kind of life circumstances could lead to my creating such a thing, as I myself have forgotten. I thought Mr. Biggles was long forgotten as well, until I found him in the bottom of a trunk while packing for my journey. I thought,” he said, glancing over at the streaky mess that ran out of the frame and dripped to the floor, “that this would be a fitting end for him.”

Jackson sat down at his desk, carefully laying his wand on the blotter in front of him. “And now, class, what technomantic truth can we derive from what I’ve just illustrated?”

No one moved. Then a hand raised slowly.

Jackson inclined his head. “Mr. Murdock?”

Murdock cleared his throat. “Don’t try to be an artist if you’re supposed to be a Technomancy teacher, sir?”

“That wasn’t quite what I had in mind, Mr. Murdock, but that is inarguably true as well. No, the truth I was illustrating is that, while a wizard painting, portrait or otherwise, is indeed still merely paint on canvas,” Jackson’s gaze searched the class, then settled on James, “only the original artist can destroy his painting. No one or nothing else. The canvas can be slashed, the frame destroyed, the bindings cut, but the painting will endure. It will continue to represent its subject, no matter what happens to it, even in a hundred pieces. Only the original artist can destroy that connection, and once he does, it is destroyed forever.”

As the class was dismissed, James couldn’t help slowing as he passed the destroyed painting of Mr. Biggles. The clown’s face was nothing more than a muddy grey blur in the center of the canvas. Squiggly streaks of paint ran over the bottom edge of the frame, puddled in the chalk tray, and dripped onto the floor, making a drab spatter of white and bloody red. James shuddered, and then walked on. He thought he’d never look at another wizard painting the same way again. As he made his way to his next class, he passed a painting of several wizards gathered around a gigantic globe. Ironically, James noticed that one of the wizards, a severe man with a black mustache and glasses, was watching him closely. James stopped and leaned in. The wizard’s stare became stonier, his eyes piercing.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about,” James said quietly. “I don’t even know how to draw. Art is Zane’s department.”

The painted wizard grimaced at him, annoyed, as if James had entirely missed the point. He made a harrumphing noise and pointed in the direction James had been walking, as if to say *move along, nothing to see here*.

James resumed his walk to Charms class, musing idly about the wizard in the painting. He'd looked familiar, but James couldn't quite place him. By the time he entered Professor Flitwick's classroom, James had already forgotten the little painted wizard and his piercing stare.



The day of the much ballyhooed first school debate came and James was surprised at how many people were planning to attend. He had assumed debates were typically stodgy little affairs attended only by the teams themselves, some teachers, and a handful of the more academically-minded students. By lunch that Friday, though, the debate had generated the sort of boisterous tension that accompanied certain Quidditch matches. The one thing that seemed to be missing, however, was the joking taunts between the supporters. Thanks to the carefully worded banners and signs advertising the debate, the student population had been rather evenly divided between two worldviews that, it seemed, were not compatible on any level. The result was a sullen tension that filled the silences where jests and competitive taunts might otherwise have been. James had not been seriously considering attending the debate. Now, though, he realized that the outcome of the event would very likely affect the entire culture of Hogwarts. For that reason, he felt an obligation to go, as well as a growing curiosity. Besides, if Zane was going to be arguing in front of a large portion of the school populace, partly in defense of Harry Potter, James knew it'd be important that he be there to show his support.

After dinner, James joined Ted and the rest of the Gremlins as they made their way to the event, along with much of the rest of the student populace.

The debate was held in the Amphitheater, where the occasional play and concert were usually performed. James had never been in the Amphitheater before. The open-air seating area, carved out of the hillside behind the east tower, descended in steep terraces down to a large stage. As James made his way through the crowded arch that opened onto the top tier of seating, he saw that the stage below was nearly empty. A high-backed, official-looking chair sat in the center rear of the stage, flanked by two podiums and two long tables, with chairs arranged along their backs. Professor Flitwick was on stage, guiding a phosphorous globe into the air with his wand, placing it among several others that lit the stage at strategic locations. The orchestra pit had been covered over with a great wooden platform, and then arranged with a library table and six chairs. Zane had explained that the judges would sit there. The noise of the crowd of students was a hushed babble, nearly lost in the normal evening noises emanating from the dim hills and the

nearby forest. Ted, Sabrina, and Damien led the way into a row halfway up the middle section, joining a group of other Gryffindors. Noah was already there. He waved at James as they found their seats.

“Gremlin salute,” Noah said, performing, with a straight face, a complicated series of hand gestures that involved a traditional hand to the forehead salute, a raised fist, a waggle of both elbows that looked a bit like a chicken dance, and ended with both hands framing the sides of his face, pinky and thumbs extended, apparently mimicking Gremlin ears.

Ted nodded, responding with only the Gremlin-ear gesture, which was apparently the countersign. “Have our friends from triple W come through for us?”

Noah nodded. “We ran a small test this afternoon under controlled circumstances. Looks even better than we hoped. And,” he added, grinning, “they provided their services free of charge. George sent a note with the package, asking only that we tell him exactly how it turns out.”

Ted smiled rather humorlessly. “We’ll give him a full report either way.”

James nudged Ted. “What’s going on?”

“James, my boy,” Ted said, scanning the crowd, “do you know what the term ‘plausible deniability’ means?”

James shook his head. “No.”

“Ask your buddy, Zane. It was invented by the Americans. Let’s just say, sometimes, it’s best not to know anything until after the fact.”

James shrugged, figuring he was sitting close enough to the action to know, probably before anyone else, what the Gremlins were up to. Someone nearby had a small wireless tuned to the Wizarding Wireless Network. The tiny voice on the speaker burbled away, forming part of the background noise, until James heard the phrase ‘crowded Amphitheater’. He swept his gaze over the groups clustered near the stage, and then saw what he was looking for. A tall man wearing a purple bowler hat was speaking into the tip of his wand. The cadence of his speech blew small, smoky puffs off the end of his wand, the puffs forming the shapes of words as they floated through the air. On a small table near the man was a machine that looked somewhat like an old-fashioned record player with a huge funnel. The wispy word-shapes were sucked into the funnel as fast as they flowed off the man’s wand. James had never seen a magical broadcast in action. He read the words the wizard was speaking a second before they were broadcast to the nearby wireless.

“The curious and the contentious alike seem to have gathered in droves for tonight’s contest,” the announcer said, “illustrating the ongoing debate all around the wizarding world these days, as doubts about Ministry policy and Auror practices meet questions regarding recent magical history. Tonight, via this special broadcast of Current Wizard’s Newswatch, we will see what one of the country’s foremost centers of magical learning thinks of this divisive issue. I’m your host, Myron Madrigal, speaking on behalf of tonight’s sponsor,

Wymnot's Wand Polish and Enchant-Enhancer: better spells come from a Wymnot wand. We'll be right back for opening comments after this important message."

The announcer twirled a finger at an assistance, who plugged the funnel with a large plunger, then spindled a record into the device. A commercial for Wymnot Wand Polish began to play on the nearby wireless. James had been concerned about the debate being broadcast to the wizarding world at large, but then decided it was better than having it parsed and reported in bits by someone like Rita Skeeter. At least this way, all the arguments would be heard in their entirety. He could only hope that Zane, Petra, and their team would argue well against Tabitha Corsica and her carefully woven agenda of doubts and half-truths.

Just as the commercial on the nearby wireless ended, Benjamin Franklyn approached the left side podium on stage. On the wireless, the announcer's voice spoke in a hushed tone, "In a daring turn of events, the chancellor of the American wizarding school, Alma Aleron, Benjamin Amadeus Franklyn has been asked to officiate tonight's debate. He approaches the podium."

"Good evening, friends, students, guests," Franklyn said, forgoing his wand and raising his clear, tenor voice. "Welcome to this, Hogwarts' inaugural All-School Debate. My name is Benjamin Franklyn, and I am honored to have been chosen to introduce tonight's teams. Without further delay, will Teams A and B take their places on the stage?"

A group of ten people stood from the front row. The group split, half ascending the stage on the right side and half on the left. They filed into the chairs behind the two tables as Franklyn introduced them. Team A consisted of Zane, Petra, Gennifer Tellus, a Hufflepuff named Andrew Haubert, and an Alma Aleron student named Gerald Jones. Team B was, not surprisingly, mostly fifth- to seventh-year Slytherins, including Tabitha Corsica, her crony, Tom Squallus, and two others, Heather Flack and Nolan Beetlebrick. The fifth person at the table, and the only one younger than fifteen, was Ralph. He sat in his chair as rigid as a statue, staring at Franklyn as if he was hypnotized.

"Tonight's debate," Franklyn continued, adjusting his square spectacles, "as can be assumed by the turnout and the press coverage, deals with subjects both weighty and far-reaching. It has been said that dissent is the greatest expression of freedom, and that debate and discourse are the fuel for a right-thinking populace to maintain a fair government. These are the axioms that define us, and tonight, we will see them in action. Let us all assume an attitude of respect and reason, regardless of our own opinions, so that what flows tonight does so in a manner befitting this school and all who have passed through its halls. No matter the outcome," Franklyn turned at this point, acknowledging the two debate teams seated on either side, "let us leave here as we entered: friends, classmates, and fellow witches and wizards."

There was a round of applause which, James thought, sounded rather more perfunctory than appreciative. Franklyn produced a paper from his robes and examined it.

"As was determined earlier this evening by lots," he called out in an official voice, "Team B is first to offer opening statements. Miss Tabitha Corsica, I believe, will represent. Miss Corsica."

Franklyn backed away from the podium, taking a seat in the high-backed chair at the rear center of the stage. Tabitha approached the left podium, her hands empty. She smiled her wonderful smile at the crowd, seeming to take every person in one by one. “Friends and classmates, teachers and members of the press, may I be so bold as to begin by pointing out that the remarks of our esteemed Professor Franklyn, in fact, represent the very heart of the error that underlies our discussion tonight?”

The crowd reacted with something like a mutual gasp or sigh of anticipation. Tabitha took the moment to turn and smile at Benjamin Franklyn. “With apologies and respect, Professor.” Franklyn seemed entirely unperturbed. He raised a hand to her, palm up, and nodded. *Do tell*, the gesture seemed to say.

“Of course, decorum and respect must rule the day during a discourse like this,” Tabitha said, returning her attention to the audience. “In that respect, we couldn’t agree more with the professor. No, the error lies in Professor Franklyn’s last sentence. He encourages us, most of all, to remember that we are all, in the end, fellow witches and wizards. Friends, is this the essential basis of our identity? If so, then I contend that we are the worst of tyrants, the lowest form of bigot. For are we not, beneath the wands and the spells, more human than witch or wizard? To allow ourselves to be primarily defined by our magic is to deny the humanity we share in common with the non-magical world. Worse, it relegates, by omission, the rest of humanity to a status both lower and less important than our own. Now, I do not ascribe these prejudices to Professor Franklyn in particular. These prejudices are as ingrained into the methods and manners of current wizarding policy as magic is ingrained into a broomstick. It is not the innate belief of the magical world that Muggle humanity is inferior to our own, but it is the unfortunate and inevitable result of current Ministry policies.

“Our argument tonight is that the assumptions of the current ruling class have led to this prejudice. Those assumptions are threefold. The first is that the Law of Secrecy is a necessary safeguard against a Muggle world supposedly incapable of dealing with our existence. While possibly necessary in a past age, we maintain that the Law of Secrecy is now obsolete, resulting only in a segregated society that unfairly denies both the wizarding and the Muggle worlds the benefits of each other.

“The second assumption is that history proves the idea that magical-Muggle congress can only result in war. We will argue that this claim has been vastly orchestrated out of a series of isolated and unconnected historical incidents that, on their own, were unfortunate, but relatively unimportant. The specter of the all-powerful evil wizard seeking world rule has been placed alongside the prejudice of the weak-minded Muggle world, incapable of accepting the existence of magical society. Both of these threats, we assert, have been cultivated by the magical ruling class to maintain a culture of fear, thus cementing their own agenda of power and control.

“And the final assumption we wish to question is the existence of so-called ‘dark’ magic. We will argue that ‘dark’ magic is simply a form of complex, if occasionally dangerous, magic, only considered evil because it was mostly used by those who at one time opposed the current magical ruling class. ‘Dark’ magic is, in short, an invention of the Auror Department, used to justify the squashing of any individual or group that the ruling class feels threatened by.

“We assert that these three assumptions form the basis of the policies of prejudice against the Muggle world. Our goal is equality, and nothing less, for Muggles, as well as ourselves. After all, before we are witch or wizard, Muggle or magical, we are first and foremost... human.”

With that, Tabitha turned and walked back to her seat at the Team B table. There was a moment of rather awed silence, then, to James dismay, the crowd erupted in applause. James looked around. Not everyone was applauding, but those that were, roughly half, did so with a grim vigor.

“...outpouring of support from the assembled students,” the voice on the wireless could just be heard to say, “as Miss Corsica, the picture of composure and assurance, takes her seat. Miss Petra Morganstern, captain of Team A, now approaches the lectern...”

Petra arranged a small stack of note cards on the podium as the cheers died away. She looked up, unsmiling.

“Ladies and gentlemen, fellow classmates, greetings,” she said, her voice crisp and ringing. “The members of Team B claim that there are three points to their argument, their ‘three assumptions’. Team A will argue that there is, in actuality, only one ‘assumption’ that is valid for debate tonight, their other two arguments being completely dependent upon it. That ‘assumption’ is the notion that history, as a science and as a study, is not reliable. Team B must convince us that history, rather than being trustworthy, is a complete fabrication, woven by the whims and deliberate manipulations of a small group of incredibly powerful ruling witches and wizards. These ruling individuals must be powerful indeed, because the history they have allegedly invented is, in fact, still in the memory of many of those still living today. Our parents and grandparents, our teachers, and yes, our leaders. They were there when this supposedly fabricated history took place, much of it right here on these very grounds. Using the logic of Team B, the Battle of Hogwarts either never occurred or occurred so differently as to be completely meaningless. If this is so, then we may well argue their other ‘assumptions’, such as the assertion that there is no necessity for the Law of Secrecy and that dark magic is an invention of the Auror Department. If, however, the historical record of the rise of the Dark Lord and his bloody quest for power and dominion over the Muggle world can be shown to be accurate, the rest of Team B’s claims fall as well. Thus, we will spend our energies on that argument only, with apologies to Team B.”

There was another moment of charged silence, precipitated by the mention of the Dark Lord, then another burst of applause, equal in volume to the previous, but scattered with exuberant whoops and whistles.

“A short but pithy opening statement by Miss Morganstern,” the announcer’s voice said. James saw the man in the purple bowler and read his words as they flowed from his wand to the broadcasting funnel. “Apparently crafted on the spot as a response to Miss Corsica’s threefold outline. This promises to be a direct and spirited dialogue, ladies and gentlemen.”

For the next forty minutes, members of each team took to the podiums, offering argument and counterargument, all timed and officiated by Professor Franklyn. The audience had been instructed to refrain from applause, but this had proven impossible to prevent. Once one round of applause had been sounded for

a team's argument, it seemed incumbent upon supporters of the opposing viewpoint to cheer their own side as well. Night descended on the Amphitheater, ominously dark, with only a thin sickle moon low on the horizon. Enchanted lanterns floated over the stairs and archways, leaving the seating areas in shadow. The stage glowed in the center, lit like noonday in the glow of Professor Flitwick's gently floating phosphorous globes. Zane faced off against Heather Flack, debating the assertion that recorded histories were always manufactured by the victors.

"I'm from the United States, you know," Zane said, addressing Heather Flack across the stage. "If your statement is true, it's a remarkable thing that I've ever learned anything about my country's occasionally terrible past, from our treatment of Native Americans, to the Salem witch-hunts, to the one-time institution of slavery. If the victors fabricate our histories, how is it that I know that even Thomas Jefferson once owned slaves?"

Benjamin Franklyn winced at that, then nodded slowly, approvingly. The supporters of Team A applauded uproariously.

Finally, with no clear outcome, the captains of both teams approached the podiums for final arguments. Tabitha Corsica still had first option.

"I appreciate," she began, glancing at Petra, "that my opponent in this debate has made it a point to restrict discussion to this one central tenet: that the recent history of the wizarding world has been enhanced and stylized to instill terror of some fabled, monstrous enemy. To be specific, they have continuously raised the image of 'the Dark Lord', as they prefer to call him. If Miss Morganstern wishes to evade the other valid facets of tonight's discussion, I will concur. If, that is, she is willing to debate the details of the one figure around whom all the other details revolve. Let us discuss the treatment of Lord Tom Riddle."

A distinct gasp of surprise and awe washed over the crowd at the mention of Voldemort's name. Even for Tabitha Corsica, James thought, bringing up Tom Riddle seemed like a terrible risk, even if he was, in fact, the heart of the issue. James sat forward in his seat, his heart pounding.

"'The Dark Lord', as the Auror Department likes to call Tom Riddle," Tabitha said into the hushed darkness, "was indeed a powerful wizard, and perhaps even a misguided one. Overzealous, he may have been. But what, really, do we know for sure about his plans and his methods? Miss Morganstern will simply tell you he was evil. He was a 'dark' wizard, she will say, intent only on power and death. But really, do such people even exist? In comic books, perhaps. And in the minds of those who breed fear. But is anyone, in reality, utterly and irredeemably evil? No, I suggest that perhaps Tom Riddle was a misguided but well-meaning wizard whose desire for Muggle-wizard equality was simply too radical a notion for the magical ruling class to allow. The powers-that-be put together a very careful campaign of half-truths and outright lies, all designed to discredit Riddle's ideas and demonize his followers, whom the Ministry-controlled media dubbed 'Death Eaters'. Despite this, Riddle's reformers were eventually able to win enough confidence to assume control of the Ministry of Magic for a short time. Only after a vicious and bloody coup were the old

powers able to defeat Riddle and his reformers, killing Tom Riddle in the process and defaming what he stood for as mercilessly as they could.”

As Tabitha spoke, a grumbling spread around the assembled crowd. The grumbling grew into isolated shouts of outrage, then calls of “Let her speak!” Finally, just as she finished, the crowd erupted into an agitated frenzy that James found frightening. He glanced around. Many students had stood and were shouting through cupped hands. Several had climbed onto their seats, stomping or shaking fists. James couldn’t tell who, among the crowd, was shouting for or against Tabitha.

At the height of the disturbance, James had a vague sense of Ted Lupin and Noah Metzker huddling around something. Suddenly, there was a burst of blinding light between them, throwing them into stark silhouette. The light shot upwards, filling the Amphitheater with its glow. At about a hundred feet, the ball of light exploded into a million tiny lights. The crowd hushed, bewildered, every eye tilted up. The tiny lights swam together, forming shapes. There was a collective gasp as the lights formed the huge shape of the legendary Dark Mark: a skull with a snake squirming out of the mouth. Then, almost instantly, the shape was overwhelmed by a stylized lightning bolt shape. The lightning bolt seemed to strike the skull, which bit the snake in half. The front half of the snake rolled over dead, its eyes turning to little crosses, and then the skull broke in half. The lightning bolt vanished as a sign popped up out of the broken skull:

You’ll laugh your skull off

at Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes!

Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade Locations!

Custom Orders our Specialty!

There was a long, silent moment of complete bewilderment as everyone stared up at the glittering letters. Then the letters broke apart and fell, showering prettily into the Amphitheater. There was a titter of laughter somewhere.

“Well,” Professor Franklyn said, having stood and moved center stage, “that was, I must admit, a well-timed, if somewhat puzzling, diversion.” There was some scattered, embarrassed laughter. Slowly, people began to resume their seats. James turned toward Ted and Noah, who were squinting and looking dazed, blinded by the Weasley Brothers’ special-order fireworks.

“Bloody Weasleys made a public service announcement out of it,” Ted muttered.

Noah shrugged. “Guess that’s why it was free of charge.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Franklyn continued, “this is indeed a subject of much passion for many of us, but we must not allow ourselves to become carried away. Miss Corsica has made some assertions that are, to many of us, very difficult to hear. However, this is a debate, and where I come from, we do not,” he said with great emphasis, “squash debate simply because an argument makes us uncomfortable. I hope we can

complete this discussion with dignity, otherwise, I am sure the Headmistress will agree with me that postponing final arguments will be the only recourse. Miss Morganstern, I believe you had the floor.”

Franklyn sat back down, and James sensed that he was far angrier than he was letting on. Petra stood behind her podium for several seconds, eyes down. Finally, she looked up, obviously shaken.

“I admit I don’t know quite where to begin in responding to Miss Corsica’s frankly incredible hypothesis. The Dark Lord was not merely evil because it was convenient for those in power to call him so. He used unspeakable methods to gain and maintain power. He was known for freely using, and for instructing his followers to use, all three Unforgivable Curses. Lord Voldemort was no more interested in Muggle equality than... than...” She stopped, fumbling. James pressed his lips together furiously. He felt for her. There were so many lies to address. Any that slipped past would be touted as truths she was reluctant to admit.

“Miss Morganstern,” Tabitha said, her voice beseeching, “do you have any basis for these claims, or are you simply repeating the things you’ve been told?”

Petra looked over at Tabitha, her face pale and furious. “Only the totality of recorded history, and the living memories of those who experienced it firsthand,” she spat. “It is incumbent on you, I suggest, to provide proof for your claims that Lord Voldemort was anything other than what all of accepted record tells us he was.”

“Since you mention that,” Tabitha said smoothly, “I believe that there are individuals here this evening who were firsthand witnesses to the Battle of Hogwarts. We could settle accounts right now, if we desired, by interviewing them in person. This is not a courtroom, though, so I will merely ask the following: Can anyone in attendance, anyone who was there at the Battle, deny that Lord Tom Riddle himself stated for all to hear that he deplored the loss of any blood in battle? Can anyone deny that he pleaded with his enemies to meet with their leader personally, so that violence could be avoided?”

Tabitha peered out over the audience. There was perfect silence but for the distant drone of the crickets and the creak of wind in the trees of the Forbidden Forest.

“No, none deny it because it is the truth,” she said, almost kindly. “Many died, of course. But it is a matter of fact that many more died than Lord Tom Riddle desired. All because those who opposed him could not bear for him to be known as anything other than a murderous madman.”

Petra had regained her composure. She spoke now, clearly and strongly. “And is it the act of a peace-loving reformer to seek out and personally murder the family of an infant, then attempt to murder the infant as well?”

“You speak of Harry Potter, then?” Tabitha said, not missing a beat. “The man who, ironically, happens to be the Head of the Auror Department?”

“You deny it is true, then?”

“I deny nothing. I simply question and challenge. I suggest only that the truth is a far more complex thing than we have been allowed to believe. I submit that allegations of cold-blooded murder and attacks on children, all of which are rather conveniently unprovable, factor very well into the doctrine of fear that has ruled us these past twenty years.”

“How dare you?” James heard his own voice before he realized he’d meant to speak. He was standing, pointing at Tabitha Corsica, trembling with rage. “How dare you call my dad a liar? That monster killed his parents! My grandparents are *dead* because of him, and you stand there and tell us that it’s some sort of made-up story! How dare you?” His voice cracked.

“I’m sorry,” Tabitha said, and her face was, indeed, a portrait of compassion. “I know you believe that is true, James.”

Professor Franklyn had stood and was moving forward, but James shouted again before Franklyn could speak.

“My dad killed your great hero!” he called, his eyes blurring with tears of rage. “That monster tried to kill my dad twice, the second time because my dad gave himself to him. Your great *savior* was a *monster*, and my dad finally defeated him!”

“Your father,” Tabitha said, her voice rising and becoming stern, “was a half-rate wizard with a good PR department. If it wasn’t for the fact that he’d been surrounded by greater wizards than himself at every turn, we wouldn’t even know his name today.”

At that, the crowd exploded again, angry outbursts and shouts filling the space like a cauldron. There was a clatter onstage. James looked and saw that Ralph, who’d never even spoken, had jumped up, knocking over his chair. Tabitha turned and looked at him, and he met her eyes for a second. *Sit down*, she mouthed at him, her eyes livid. Ralph returned her glare, then turned resolutely and left the stage. James saw it, and even in the midst of his anguish and fear at the nearly rioting crowd, his heart rejoiced.

There was no point in continuing the debate any further. Headmistress McGonagall joined Professor Franklyn on the stage and both shot red flares from their wands, restoring order to the Amphitheater. With no preamble, the Headmistress instructed all the students to return immediately to their common rooms. Her face was stern and very pale. As the crowd muttered and grumbled, funneling through the arched entryway back into the castle proper, James saw Ralph working toward him through the crowd. He moved aside until the larger boy caught up.

“I can’t do it anymore,” Ralph said to James, his voice low and his eyes downcast. “I’m sorry she said those terrible, stupid things. You can keep hating me if you want, but I just can’t keep up with all this Progressive Element rubbish. I don’t know anything about it, really, except that it’s just too much work to be so... so *political*.”

James couldn’t help grinning. “Ralph, you’re a brick. I don’t hate you. I should apologize to you.”

“Well, let’s apologize later, OK?” Ralph said, working his way toward the archway with James following in his wake. “Right now, I just want to get out of here. Tabitha Corsica has been staring holes into me ever since I left the stage. Besides, Zane says that Ted’s invited us to hang out in your common room. He wants to gloat over having won over a member of Team B.”

“That won’t bother you?” James asked.

“Nah,” Ralph replied, shrugging, “it’s worth it. Gryffindors have better snacks.”



10. HOLIDAY AT GRIMMAULD PLACE

The next Monday, James, Zane, and Ralph stood outside the door of Headmistress McGonagall's Advanced Transfiguration class until the last of her students left and she was gathering her things.

"Come in, come in," she called to the three boys without looking up. "Stop lurking outside the door like vultures. How may I help you?"

"Madam Headmistress," James began tentatively, "we want to talk to you about the debate."

"Do you, now?" she asked, glancing up at James for a moment, then shouldering her bag. "Why, I cannot begin to imagine. The sooner we can all forget that fiasco, the better."

The boys scrambled to follow the Headmistress as she strode toward the door. "But nobody is forgetting it, Madam," James said quickly. "It was all anybody talked about the whole weekend. People are getting really stirred up about it. There was almost a fight out in the courtyard yesterday, when Mustrum Jewel heard Reavis McMillan call Tabitha Corsica a lying twit. If Professor Longbottom hadn't been nearby, Mustrum probably would've killed Reavis."

“This is a school, Mr. Potter, and a school is, in its simplest form, a place where young people gather. Young people are occasionally prone to have spats. This is why, among other reasons, Hogwarts employs Mr. Filch.”

“It wasn’t a spat, Madam,” Ralph said, following the Headmistress out into the corridor. “They were really mad. Daft mad, if you know what I mean. People are coming unglued about this whole business.”

“Then, like Mr. Potter says, it is fortunate Professor Longbottom was nearby. I fail to see, precisely, why this is your problem.”

Zane trotted to keep up with the Headmistress’ stride. “Well, the thing is, ma’am, we’re just wondering why you’re letting it all go on? I mean, you were there when the Battle took place. You know what this Voldemort guy was like. You could just tell everyone how it was and put Tabitha in her place, neat as you please.”

McGonagall stopped suddenly, leaving the boys to scramble to a halt near her. “What, may I ask, would you three wish me to do?” she said, dropping her voice and looking at each one intently. “The truth about the Dark Lord and his followers has been common knowledge for thirty years, ever since he murdered your grandparents, Mr. Potter. Do you suppose that my repeating it one more time will dispel all the revisionist rabble-rousing that has been going on, not only at this school, but throughout the wizarding world? Hmm?” Her eyes were like diamond chips as she glared at them. James realized that she was, if anything, even more agitated about the debate than they were. “And suppose I summon Miss Corsica to my office and forbid her from disseminating these lies and distortions. Do you expect that this ‘Progressive Element’ of theirs will simply give up? How long do you suppose it would be before we’d be reading an article in the *Daily Prophet* about how the administration of Hogwarts is working with the Auror Department to stifle the ‘free exchange of ideas on school grounds?’”

James was stunned. He had assumed that the Headmistress was indulging Tabitha Corsica for some reason, allowing, for a time, her charade to continue. It simply hadn’t occurred to him that McGonagall might not, in fact, be capable of addressing the matter without making it worse.

“So what do we do, ma’am?” James asked.

“We?” McGonagall said, raising her eyebrows. “My dear James, I admit that you amaze and impress me. Despite what you may believe, the future of the wizarding world does not, in fact, rest upon you and your two friends’ shoulders.” She saw the annoyed grimace on his face, and then she showed him one of her rare smiles. She bent a bit to speak more conspiratorially, addressing all three boys. “The revived memory of the Dark Lord is not an overlarge concern to those of us who once faced the living thing. This is a whim in the mind of a fickle populace, and irritating as it may be, it will pass. In the meantime, what you three can do is attend your classes, do your homework, and continue to be the sharp-witted and strong-hearted boys you obviously are. And if anyone around you tries to say Tom Riddle was a better man than Harry Potter, you have my permission--my instruction, even--to transfigure their pumpkin juice into nurgle water.” She eyed

the three boys seriously, one by one. “Just tell them I prescribed you to practice that particular spell. Understood?”

Zane and Ralph grinned at each other. James sighed. McGonagall nodded curtly, straightened herself, and continued briskly on her way. After five steps, she turned back.

“Oh, and boys?”

“Yes, ma’am?” Zane said.

“Two sharp flicks and the word ‘*nurglammonias*’. Emphasis on the first and third syllables.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Zane replied again, grinning.

The school year descended through autumn, approaching the winter holidays. The football field became carpeted with leaves, crunching and kicking up under the feet of Professor Curry’s Muggle Studies teams. The unofficial football tournament ended with James’ team winning. James himself scored the winning goal, his third of the day, against goalie Horace Birch, the Ravenclaw Gremlin. His team collected around him, jumping and hollering as if they’d just won the House Cup. In fact, the winning team’s house was rewarded one hundred points by Professor Curry, that being the best prize she could offer. The team circled James, heaving him onto their shoulders and carrying him into the courtyard as if he had just returned from slaying a dragon. He grinned hugely, his cheeks beet red in the chilly autumn wind, and his spirits were higher than they’d been all year.

The routine of classes and homework, which had been daunting during the first weeks, became dull and predictable. Professor Jackson assigned endless dreaded essays and sprung unsuspecting ‘pop quizzes’ on his class every couple of weeks. Zane told James and Ralph amusing tales of confrontations between Professor Trelawney and Madame Delacroix during his Tuesday night Constellations Club, which, like Divination class, both professors managed to share. On the Quidditch pitch, James continued to advance his broom skills with the help of both Ted and Zane until he began to feel cautiously confident that he might, indeed, make the Gryffindor team next year. He began to imagine how rich it might be to show up at tryouts next spring and wildly surpass everyone’s memories of his first year attempts. Zane, for his part, continued to fly remarkably well for the Ravenclaws. Calling on his rather unique Muggle background, he invented a move he called ‘buzzing the tower’, in which he’d hit a Bludger around the press box, letting it gather speed as it circled back, then meet it on the other side, striking it again to add even more speed and a bit of direction. Using that trick, he had managed to knock two players completely off their brooms, leading to a few apologetic visits to the hospital wing.

Life for Ralph in the Slytherin house had been rough for a while. Tabitha had never actually spoken to him about his desertion of the debate stage or his abandoning of the Progressive Element meetings. James and Zane figured she’d ceased having any use for him when he’d returned to being James’ friend. Eventually, the older Slytherins simply forgot about Ralph, apart from a few cool stares or snide remarks in the Slytherin common room. Then, surprisingly, Ralph began to befriend some other first- and second-year Slytherins.

Unlike the blue badge wearers, none of them seemed all that interested in the broader world of politics and causes. To be sure, there was a sort of shifty guile to even the first-year Slytherins, but a couple of them seemed to genuinely like Ralph, and even James had to admit they were funny, in a double-edged sort of way.

Defense Against the Dark Arts became a favorite class of James, Zane, and Ralph. Professor Franklyn taught a very practical class, with many exciting stories and real-life examples from his own long and wildly various adventures. James, to no one's surprise, was a very good dueler. He admitted, with a sheepish grin, that he'd been taught quite a lot of defensive technique by his dad. Nobody, however, including James, was willing to go up against Ralph in a duel. Ralph's wand skills seemed remarkably haphazard when it came to defensive spell-casting. The first time he'd dueled, Ralph had attempted a simple *Expelliarmus* spell on Victoire. He struck out with his wand, a bit wildly, and a bolt of blue lightning had erupted from the end, singeing Victoire's hair so that a ragged bald stripe ran straight across the top of her head. She patted at it with her hand, then her eyes nearly boggled out of her head. She screamed in rage and had to be restrained by three other students from tackling Ralph, who was three times her size. Ralph backed away, apologizing profusely, his wand still smoking.

Only once, during an evening in the Ravenclaw common room, did anyone have the temerity to mention anything to James, Zane, and Ralph about the debate. They were just finishing their homework when a large fourth year named Gregory Templeton sat down at the table across from them.

"Hey, you were both in that debate, weren't you?" he said, pointing back and forth between Zane and Ralph.

"Yeah, Gregory," Zane said, shoving his books into his backpack, his voice betraying his general dislike of the older boy.

"You were the one at the table with Corsica, right?" Gregory said, turning to Ralph.

"Er. Yeah," Ralph said, "but..."

"You tell her from me she's right on the mark, eh? I been reading a book that tells all about the whole thing. It's called *The Dumbledore Plot*, and it's all about how the old man and that Harry Potter cooked the whole thing up, start to finish. Did you know they made up the whole story about Riddle and the Horcruxes on the night the old man died? Some even say it was Harry Potter himself killed him, once they'd worked it all out."

James struggled to control his temper. He looked levelly at Gregory. "Do you even know who I am?"

Zane stared hard at the bottle in Gregory's hand. "Hey," he asked with forced casualness, surreptitiously pulling out his wand, "what's that you're drinking?"

Ninety seconds later, James, Zane, and Ralph scrambled as Gregory spat nurgle water all over the common room table.

“Practicing!” Zane called, ducking under Gregory’s grasping arms. “I swear! I was supposed to practice that transfiguration! Your drink just got in the way! Ask McGonagall!”

The three boys successfully ducked from the room, laughing uproariously at the ensuing chaos.

By Christmas holiday, James was ready for a break. After lunch on his last day of class, James went up to the Gryffindor sleeping chamber to pack his things. The sky outside the tower window had grown chilly and grey, making him wish for the grand fireplace back at number twelve Grimmauld Place and one of Kreacher’s very complicated hot chocolates, which consisted, at last count, of fourteen unnamed ingredients, including, he had been assured, at least a pinch of actual chocolate.

“Hey, James,” Ralph’s voice called up the stairs, “you up there?”

“Yeah. Come on up, Ralph.”

“Thanks,” Ralph panted, climbing the steps. “I came up after lunch with Petra. She said you’d be here packing. All raring to go, I expect.”

“Yeah! We’re having everyone over to the old headquarters for the holidays this year. Uncles George and Ron, Aunts Hermione and Fleur, Ted and his grandmum, Victoire, even Luna Lovegood, who you don’t know, but you’d be keen on. She’s the weirdest grownup I’ve ever met, but in a good way. Mostly. Grandmum and Granddad won’t be there, though. They’re visiting Charlie and everybody in Prague this year. Still, I think even Neville will be there. Professor Longbottom, I mean.”

Ralph nodded glumly, staring into James’ trunk. “Sounds swell. Yeah, well, I hope you have a happy Christmas and all that, then.”

James stopped packing, remembering that Ralph’s dad was traveling for business over the holidays. “Oh, yeah. So what will you be doing, Ralph? Will you be spending Christmas with your grandparents or something?”

“Hmm?” Ralph said, glancing up. “Oh. Nah. Looks like I’ll just be hanging around here for the holidays. Zane’s not leaving until next week, so at least I’ll have him to hang around with over the weekend. After that... well, I’ll figure out something to do with myself.” He sighed hugely.

“Ralph,” James said, tossing a pair of mismatched socks into his trunk, “do you want to come and have Christmas with my family and me?”

Ralph tried to look surprised. “What? No, no, I’d never want to impose on your big family gathering, what with all the, you know... I couldn’t. No...”

James frowned. “Ralph, you prat, if you don’t come home with me for the holidays, I will personally perform a random transfiguration on you with your own wand. How about that, then?”

“Well, you don’t have to get pushy about it!” Ralph exclaimed, then his face broke into a grin. “Your mum and dad won’t mind?”

“No. To tell you the truth, with all the people that’ll be in and out of the place, I’m not sure they’ll even notice.”

Ralph rolled his eyes. “I meant about me being on the... you know, the wrong side of the debate and everything.”

“They listened to it on the wireless, Ralph.”

“I know!”

“And you never said a word.”

Ralph opened his mouth, then closed it. He thought for a moment. Finally, he grinned and plopped onto Ted’s bed. “I see your point. So you say Victoire will be there?”

“Don’t get any ideas. She’s part Veela you know. She puts the whammy on any guy that gets within ten feet of her.”

“I just wanted to try to make it up to her somehow. You know, about that whole incident in D.A.D.A.”

James slammed his trunk. “Ralph, mate, the less you say about that, the better.”



The next morning, breakfast in the Great Hall was thinly attended. A heavy frost had fallen in the early hours, etching silver fern shapes in the corners of the windows and giving the view beyond a hoary ghostliness. James and Ralph arrived at the same time and found Zane at the Ravenclaw table.

“You’re a lucky stiff, Ralph,” Zane said grumpily, huddling around his coffee cup. “I’m dying to see what a magical Christmas is like.”

“To tell you the truth,” James said, pouring himself a pumpkin juice, “I doubt it’d live up to your imagination.”

“Maybe you’re right. Even at the best of times, I gotta admit, it feels a little like Halloween around here.”

“Hey, Ralph,” James said, nudging the bigger boy, “wait until you see our traditional Christmas parade of ghouls! We’ll have candy cane-stuffed bats to eat and drink hot chocolate out of elf skulls!”

Ralph blinked. Zane looked sour and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, you’re a laugh riot. Not.”

“Come on,” Ralph said, finally getting the joke. “You’ll have a great Christmas with your family. At least you get to see your mum and dad.”

“Yeah, sure. An eight-hour flight back to the States with my sister, Greer, bugging me the whole way about life at that crazy magical school. She’ll be disappointed that, so far, the only way I can affect things with my wand is to hit them with it.”

“We’re not allowed to practice magic out of Hogwarts, anyway,” Ralph said instructively.

Zane ignored him. “And then Christmas with the grandparents and all my cousins in Ohio. You have no idea what kind of craziness that always is.”

James couldn’t help asking. “How do you mean?”

“Imagine the traditional all-American Norman Rockwell Christmas scene, right?” Zane said, holding up his hands as if framing a picture. “Opening presents, and carving turkey, and carols by the Christmas tree. Got it?” Ralph and James nodded, trying not to smile at Zane’s grave expression.

“All right,” Zane went on. “Now imagine hinkypunks instead of people. You’ll get the idea.”

James burst out laughing. Ralph, as usual, just blinked and looked back and forth between the two other boys.

“That’s fantastic!” James hooted.

Zane smiled reluctantly. “Yeah, well, it is pretty funny, I guess. The screeches and the clawing, all those tiny shreds of wrapping paper flying all over the place, landing in the fireplace and nearly burning the place to the ground.”

“What’s a hinkypunk?” Ralph asked, trying to keep up.

“Ask Hagrid next Care of Magical Creatures,” James said, still chuckling. “It’ll all make sense.”

Late that morning, Ralph and James said goodbye to Zane, then hauled their trunks out to the courtyard. Ted and Victoire were already there, sitting on their trunks on the top step, framed against the strangely silent, frost-laden grounds. Victoire’s hair had been regrown as well as possible by Madam Curio in the hospital wing, but the new hair was just different enough in texture and color to be noticeable. As a result, Victoire had taken to wearing a rather amazing variety of hats. The hats, if anything, enhanced her

appearance, but she complained about them at every opportunity. Today, she had donned a small ermine pillbox cap, cocked rakishly over her left eyebrow. She glared coolly at Ralph as he dragged his trunk out onto the step. A few minutes later, Hagrid drove up at the head of a carriage. Ralph's mouth dropped open when he saw that nothing, apparently, was pulling the carriage.

"You lot aren't s'posed to see these until next year, mind," Hagrid said to James and Ralph. He yanked the brake lever, climbed down, and began heaving their trunks easily onto the back of the carriage. "So be sure to act surprised when yeh sees 'em next spring, right?"

"Oh, Hagrid," Victoire said haughtily, "if zese awful things are as ugly as mummy tells me, I'm glad I can't see zem, anyway." She held out a hand and Ted took it, helping her rather unnecessarily into the carriage.

There were a few other students crammed into the carriage, all similarly late departures for the holidays. Hagrid drove them to Hogsmeade station, where they boarded the Hogwarts Express again. The train was far emptier than it had been on their arriving journey. The four of them found a compartment near the end, then settled in for the long trip.

"So Hogsmeade is a wizard village?" Ralph asked Ted.

"Sure is. Home to The Three Broomsticks and Honeydukes Sweetshop. Best Cockroach Clusters in the world. Lots of other shops, too. You'll get to go on Hogsmeade weekends starting your third year."

Ralph looked thoughtful, which meant his brow pinched down while his lower lip pooched up, squeezing his entire face toward his nose. "So how do wizards keep Muggles out of a magical village? I mean, aren't there any roads or anything?"

"Tricky question, mate," Ted said, slouching on his seat and kicking off his shoes.

Victoire wrinkled her nose. "You will keep zose dirt-kickers away from me, Mr. Lupin."

Ted ignored her, stretching his legs across the compartment and resting his feet on the opposite seat. "I'm in old Stonewall's Applied Advanced Technomancy class this semester, and all I can tell you is that places like Hogsmeade aren't just hidden because Muggles can't find a road in. It's all quantum. If Petra was here, she could explain it better."

James was curious. "What's 'quantum' mean?"

Ted shrugged. "It's a joke in A.A.T. When in doubt, just say 'quantum'." He sighed resignedly, gathering his thoughts. "All right, imagine that there are places on the earth that are like a hole in space patched with rubber, see? You can't tell anything's different from the top, but it's maybe a little bouncy or something. Then, say, some wizard comes along who really knows his quantum. He says, 'Gor, here's a place where we can put up a smashing wizard village.'" So what he does is he conjures something sort of like a huge magical weight, but it's really, really tiny, right? And the weight drops into the bit of rubbery reality and pulls

it down, down, down. OK. So the weight punches that rubber reality right out into another dimension, making a funnel in the shape of space-time.”

“Wait,” Ralph said, frowning in concentration. “What’s space-time?”

“Never mind,” Ted said, waving dismissively. “Doesn’t matter. It’s all quantum. Nobody gets it except for crusty old parchment-heads like Professor Jackson. So anyway, there’s this funnel in space-time where the weight pushes down on the rubber reality. Muggles, see, can only operate on the surface of reality. They don’t see where the funnel dips down into this new dimensional space. To them, it just isn’t even there. Magic folk, though, we can follow the funnel down off main-space, if we know what to look for and share the secret. So we build places like Hogsmeade there.”

“So Hogsmeade is down in some sort of funnel-shaped valley,” Ralph said experimentally.

“No,” Ted said, sitting up again. “It’s just, you know, a metaphor. The landscape looks just the same, but dimensionally, it goes out through the other side of space-time, where Muggles can’t go. Lots of wizard places have been built that way. We breed magical creatures in quantum preserves. Whole mountain ranges where the giants live, all buried in quantum, off the Muggle maps. That’s pretty much how unplotability works. Simple as that.”

“Simple as what?” Ralph said, frustrated.

Ted sighed. “Look, mate, it’s like the Cockroach Clusters in Honeydukes. You don’t need to understand how they make them. You just need to eat ‘em.”

Ralph slumped. “I’m not sure I can do either.”

“This bloke’s a real barrel o’ laughs, isn’t he?” Ted asked James.

“So if Muggles can’t get in,” James replied, “how’d that Muggle get onto the school grounds?”

“Oh yeah,” Ted said, leaning back again. “The mysterious Quidditch intruder. Is that what people are saying now? That he was a Muggle?”

James had forgotten that not everything he knew about the intruder was common knowledge. He recalled now what Neville Longbottom had said about the wild rumors surrounding the mysterious man on the Quidditch pitch. “Yeah,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant, “I heard he may have been a Muggle. I was just wondering how a Muggle could get in, what with all this stuff about, you know, quantum.”

“Actually,” Ted said, squinting out the window at the brightening day, “I guess even a Muggle could get in if they were accompanied by a wizard or led in somehow. It’s not that they *can’t* get in, exactly. It’s just that, as far as their senses are concerned, the spaces don’t even exist. If a magical person led them in, though, and the Muggle pushed through what their senses were telling them... sure, it’d be possible, I guess. But who’d be stupid enough to do such a thing?”

James shrugged, and looked at Ralph. The look on Ralph's face mirrored what James was thinking. Stupid or not, somebody had indeed led a Muggle onto the Hogwarts grounds. How or why that had been arranged was still a mystery, but James intended to do his best to find out.

The four of them lunched on sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, taken from the Hogwarts kitchens that morning, then settled into companionable silence. The day became hard and bright, with the sun shining like a diamond over the marching fields and woods. The frost had burned away, leaving the ground raw and grey. The skeletal trees scoured at the sky, standing on carpets of dead leaves. Ralph read and napped. Victoire flipped through a pile of magazines, then wandered off in search of a few friends she suspected were somewhere on board. Ted taught James to play a game called 'Winkles and Augers', which involved using wands to levitate a piece of parchment folded into the shape of a fat triangle. According to Ted, both players used their wands--the winkles--to simultaneously levitate the folded parchment--the auger--each one trying to guide the paper into their designated goal area, usually a circle drawn on a piece of parchment and placed near their opponent. James had gotten marginally better at levitation, but he was no match for Ted, who knew just how to undercut James' wandwork, bobbing the auger out of range and swooping it onto his goal with a resounding smack.

"It's all about practice, James," Ted said. "I've been playing this since my first year. We've had as many as four people on a team sometimes, and used augers as big as the bust of Godric Gryffindor in the common room. I'm personally responsible for the fact that his left ear's been glued back on. Didn't know the *Reparo* charm back then, and now we've come to rather prefer him that way."

By the time the train pulled into Platform Nine and Three Quarters, dusk had begun to turn the sky a dreamy lilac color. James, Ted, and Ralph waited for the lurch as the train came to a full stop, then stood, stretched, and made their way out to the platform.

The porter took their tickets, then produced their trunks with an *Accio* spell, sucking each trunk rather roughly out of the baggage compartment and plunking it at its owner's feet. Victoire caught up with them as they piled their trunks onto a large cart.

"I'm to escort you all to the old headquarters," Ted said importantly, drawing himself to his full height. "It's close enough, and your parents are pretty busy tonight, James, what with everyone else arriving, and Lily and Albus just getting out of school today as well."

They filed through the hidden portal that separated Platform Nine and Three Quarters from the Muggle platforms of King's Cross station.

"You don't drive, Ted," Victoire said reproachfully. "And you'll hardly fit the four of us on your broom. What do you expect to do?"

"I suppose you're right, Victoire," Ted said, stopping in the center of the concourse and looking around. Muggle travelers moved around them, hurrying here and there, most bundled into heavy coats and

hats. The huge concourse echoed with the sound of train announcements and the tinkly din of recorded Christmas carols.

“Looks like we’re stuck,” Ted said mildly. “I’d say this is an emergency of sorts, wouldn’t you?”

“Ted, no!” Victoire scolded as Ted raised his right hand, his wand sticking up out of it.

There was a loud crack that echoed all around the concourse, apparently unheard by the milling Muggles. A huge, purple shape shot through the doors framed in the gigantic glassed arch at the head of the concourse. It was, of course, the Knight Bus. James had known to expect it when Ted had made the signal, but he’d never known it could travel off-road. The enormous triple-decker bus dodged and squeezed through the oblivious crowd, never losing speed until it squeaked violently to a halt directly in front of Ted. The doors shuttled open and a man in a natty, purple uniform leaned out.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus,” the man said, a bit huffily. “Emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. You know this is the middle of effing King’s Cross station, don’t you? Seems like you could’ve at least made it to the front step.”

“Evening, Frank,” Ted said airily, hoisting Victoire’s trunk up to the conductor. “It’s this bad leg of mine again. Old Quidditch injury. Acts up at the worst of times.”

“Old Quidditch injury my topmost granny’s last molar,” Frank muttered, stacking the trunks on a shelf just inside the door. “You try pulling that gaf one more time and I’m going to charge you a Galleon just for being a nuisance.”

Ralph was reluctant to get onto the bus. “You say it’s close? This headquarters place? Maybe we could, you know, walk?”

“In this cold?” Ted replied heartily.

“And with his bad leg?” Frank added sourly.

Ralph climbed on and had no sooner crossed the threshold when the doors slammed shut.

“Corner of Pancras and St. Chad’s, Ernie,” Ted called, grabbing a nearby brass handle.

The driver nodded, set his face grimly, gripped the steering wheel as if he meant to wrestle it, then punched the accelerator. Ralph, despite James’ advice, had forgotten to grab onto something. The Knight Bus rocketed forward, throwing him backwards onto one of the brass beds that, strangely enough, seemed to occupy the lowest level of the bus instead of seats.

“Hmmp?” the sleeping wizard that Ralph had landed on muttered, raising his head from the pillow. “Grosvenor Square already?”

The bus performed an inconceivably tight hairpin turn, circling a group of tourists who were staring up at the departures board, then rocketed across the concourse again, whipping around businessmen and old ladies like a gust of wind. The glassed arch loomed over them, and James was certain the Knight Bus couldn't possibly fit through the open doorways, large as they were. Then he remembered that the bus had, indeed, come in through those doors. He braced himself. Without slowing, the bus squeezed through the door like a water balloon through a mousehole, popping out onto the crowded street and swerving wildly.

"I hear we're having goose for dinner tonight!" Ted called to James as the bus careened through a busy intersection.

"Yeah!" James called back. "Kreacher insisted on a full course meal our first night back!"

"Gotta love that ugly little brute!" Ted yelled appreciatively. "How's Ralph doing?"

James glanced around. Ralph was still sprawled on the bed with the sleeping wizard. "It's all right," he yelled, clutching the bed with both hands. "I threw up in the souvenir sleeping cap they gave me."

The Knight Bus screamed around the corner where St. Chad's Street met Argyle Square, then jammed to a halt. If anything, the sudden cessation of motion was as jarring as the ride itself. The gigantic purple bus sat quietly and primly, puttering a dainty cloud of exhaust. The doors shuttled open and Ted, Victoire, James, and Ralph clambered out, the latter a little drunkenly. Frank, despite the rankled look he shot Ted, stacked their trunks carefully on the sidewalk and bid them a happy Christmas. The doors cranked shut and a moment later, the Knight Bus leapt down the street, streaking around a lorry and performing something rather like a pirouette at the intersection. Three seconds later, it was gone.

"That worked as well as could be expected," Ted said heartily, grabbing his and Victoire's trunks by the handle and yanking them toward a line of dilapidated row houses.

"What number is it?" Ralph said, puffing and dragging his huge trunk.

"Number twelve. Right here," James replied. He had been to the old headquarters so many times he'd forgotten that it was invisible to most people. Ralph stopped at the base of the steps, his brow furrowed and frowning.

"Oh yeah," James said, turning around. "OK, Ralph. You can't see it yet, but it's right here. Number twelve Grimmauld Place, right here between eleven and thirteen. It used to belong to my dad's godfather, Sirius Black, but he willed it to Dad. It was the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, back in the day when they were fighting Voldemort. They buried it with the best Secrecy Spells and Disillusionment Charms all the most powerful good wizards at the time could conjure. It was the best kept secret place of the Order, until right at the end, when a Death Eater followed my aunt here using Side-Along Apparition. Anyway, it officially still belongs to Dad, but we don't live here most of the time. Kreacher keeps it up when we're not here."

“I didn’t understand about every third word of that,” Ralph said, sighing, “but I’m cold. How do we get in?”

James reached down for Ralph’s hand. Ralph gave it to him, and James pulled him up onto the first step of the landing leading into number twelve. Ralph stumbled, regained his footing and looked up. His eyes widened and a grin of delight spread across his face. James had no memory of his first visit to the old headquarters, but he knew from other people’s descriptions how the doorway revealed itself the first time you arrived, how number twelve simply pushed numbers eleven and thirteen aside like a man shouldering his way through a crowd. James couldn’t help grinning back at Ralph’s wonderment.

“I love being a wizard,” Ralph said meaningfully.

As James slammed the door, his mum strode quickly toward him from the hall, wiping her hands on a towel. “James!” she cried, gathering him into her arms and nearly yanking him off his feet.

“Mum,” James said, embarrassed and pleased. “Come on, you’re gonna melt the Chocolate Frog in my shirt pocket already.”

“You’re not too old to give your mum a kiss after being gone for four months, you know,” she chided him.

“You know how it is,” Ted exclaimed mournfully. “One moment, they’re yanking your apron strings, the next, they’re asking to borrow the broom to go snogging with some crumpet. Where *does* the time go?”

James’ mum grinned, turning to Ted and embracing him as well. “Ted, you never change. Or shut up. Welcome. And you too, Victoire. Adorable hat, by the way.” Ralph groaned, but James’ mum went on before Victoire could offer any pointed explanation. “And you are Ralph, of course. Harry mentioned you, and of course, James has told me loads about you in his letters. My name’s Ginny. I hear you are quite the wand master.”

“Where is Dad, by the way?” James asked quickly, cutting Victoire off again.

“He picked up Andromeda after work today. They should be home soon enough. Everyone else will be here tomorrow.”

“James!” two smaller voices chimed in unison, to the accompaniment of thundering footsteps. “Ted! Victoire!” Lily and Albus shoved past their mum. “What’d you bring us?” Albus demanded, stopping in front of James.

“Direct from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” James said grandly, “I bring you both... hugs!” He grabbed Albus in a bear hug. Albus pushed and struggled, simultaneously laughing and annoyed.

“No! I wanted some Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum from the cart lady! I told you!”

Ted squatted down and squeezed Lily. "I got you something you'll love, my dear."

"What is it?" she asked, suddenly shy.

"You'll have to wait until Christmas, won't you? Your mummy's all stocked up on dragon kibble, isn't she?"

"Ted Lupin!" Ginny snapped. "Don't get her hopes up, you rogue. Now come on, all of you. Kreacher's been in the basement all afternoon preparing what he calls 'a fitting and proper tea service'. Don't fill up, though, or you'll not be hungry for the goose he cooked, and he'll sulk all week."

Harry and Ted's grandmum, Andromeda Tonks, arrived half an hour later, and the rest of the evening was a whirlwind of food, happy laughter, and catching up. Harry and Ginny, it turned out, hadn't even listened to the Hogwarts debate, despite what James had assumed. Andromeda Tonks had, though, and was full of endless vitriol for Tabitha Corsica and her team. Fortunately, she had no idea whatsoever that Ralph had also been on the team, and Ralph was all too happy to allow her to continue in that ignorance.

"Don't worry," Ted murmured to Ralph over dessert, "if anybody says anything, I'll tell her you were a spy operating undercover. She loves espionage, does the old dear."

Kreacher hadn't changed a single iota. He bowed low to James, one hand over his heart, the other spread wide. "Master James, come back from his first year of schooling, he has," he warbled in his bullfrog voice. "Kreacher has prepared Master's quarters just the way he likes them. Would Master and his friend care for a watercress sandwich?"

Kreacher had, as usual, kept the house in exceptional order, and had even gone to the trouble to decorate for the holidays. Unfortunately, Kreacher's concept of good cheer was a bit rustic, and the result would have amused Zane endlessly. The severed heads of the previous house-elves, which still hung in the hallway as a testament to the original pureblood owners of the estate, had been dressed with fake, white beards and conical, green caps with jingle bells on the tips.

"Kreacher had bewitched them to sing holiday songs, too, he did," Kreacher told James and Ralph a bit petulantly. "But the missus decided that that was perhaps a bit too... festive. Kreacher liked it, though, just the same." He seemed to be angling to be allowed to reinstate the caroling heads. James assured Kreacher that it had been a wonderfully inventive idea and he'd talk to his mum about it. He was, in fact, morbidly curious to see and hear the heads in action.

Both Lily and Albus followed James and Ralph around most of the night, begging to see what the boys could do with their newly learned skills.

"Come on, James!" Albus demanded. "Show us a levitation! Levitate Lily!"

"No!" Lily cried. "Levitate Albus! Fly him out the window!"

“You both know I can’t do magic once I’m off the train and officially out of Hogwarts,” James said wearily. “I’ll get in trouble.”

“Dad’s Head Auror, you git. You probably won’t even get a warning.”

“It’s irresponsible,” James said seriously. “You get older and you’ll know what that means.”

“You can’t do it, can you?” Albus taunted. “James can’t do a levitation! Some wizard you are. First Squib in the Potter family. Mum will die of shame.”

“You’re the same Albus-blabbus you ever were, you little skrewt.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“What, skrewt or Albus-blabbus?” James smiled. “You know Albus-blabbus is your real name, don’t you? It’s on your birth certificate. I saw it.”

“Albus-blabbus!” Lily sang, dancing around her older brother.

Albus jumped on James, wrestling him to the floor.

Later, as James and Ralph headed to James’ bedroom for the night, they passed a curtain that seemed to be drawn over a section of wall. A sleepy muttering came from behind it.

“Old Mrs. Black,” James explained. “Crazy old nutter. Wigs out about people desecrating the house of her fathers and stuff every time she sees any of us. Dad and Neville have done everything they could think of to get the old bat off the wall, but she’s stuck there right good. Even considered cutting out the section of wall with the portrait on it, but it’s a main wall. Cutting her out would probably bring the next floor right down on top of us. Besides, strange as it may seem, Kreacher’s rather attached to her, since she was his old mistress. So I suppose she’s part of the family forever.”

Ralph peeked tentatively behind the curtain. He furrowed his brow. “Is she... watching television?”

James shrugged. “We discovered that a few years back. We had the front door open because we were moving in a new sofa. She saw a telly through the window across the street and shut right up for the first time in weeks. So we hired a wizard artist to come and paint one right into her portrait. Crazy old bat loves the chat shows. Ever since then, well, she’s been a lot more bearable.”

Ralph slowly let the curtain drape back over the portrait. A man’s voice behind it was saying, “And when did you first notice that your dog had Tourette’s syndrome, Mrs. Drakemont?”

Kreacher had arranged a cot for Ralph in James’ room. His trunk was placed neatly at the end of it, and there was a ribbon-wrapped pinecone on each pillow, apparently Kreacher’s idea of a Christmas mint.

“This used to be my dad’s godfather’s room,” James said sleepily, once they had settled down.

“Cool,” Ralph muttered. “Good guy, was he? Or was he a nutter, like the old witch in the portrait?”

“One of the best guys ever, according to Dad. We’ll have to tell you about him sometime. He was wanted for murder for over a decade.”

There was a minute of silence, and then Ralph’s voice spoke in the darkness. “You wizards can be pretty bloody confusing, you know that?”

James grinned. A minute later, both of them were asleep.



11. THE THREE RELICS

After the initial excitement of travel and arrivals, Christmas break at Grimmauld Place became rather humdrum. James introduced Ralph to everyone, and Ralph very shortly became simply one more of the throng of friends and family that crammed the house. On the Wednesday before Christmas, Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione arrived, along with their children, Hugo and Rose. They were followed shortly thereafter by Uncle Bill and Aunt Fleur, Victoire's parents. James was very fond of them all, and even though the house was beginning to feel rather strained to capacity, he was thrilled they were staying over through the break.

"It's a good thing Mum and Dad are off with Charlie this year," Ron commented, lugging his and Hermione's luggage up the steps to their third-floor bedroom. "This place seems so much smaller than it did when we were kids."

"It's just you who's bigger, Ron," Hermione chided, elbowing him affectionately in the stomach. "You've got no room to complain."

"I'm not complaining. At least we get a room. If Percy was here, he'd have to bunk in with Kreacher."

James and Ralph, along with James' siblings and cousins, spent their days by the fire, playing wizard chess with Uncle Ron or roaming the nearby streets, performing last-minute errands and Christmas shopping with Ginny or Aunt Hermione. Fleur and Bill enlisted James and Ralph's help in picking out and

transporting a Christmas tree, which had looked merely charmingly plump outside, but had taken up two-thirds of the main hall when they'd brought it in.

"Seems a shame to do it," Bill said, producing his wand and pointing it at the tree. "*Reducio!*"

The tree shrunk by a third, but managed to maintain its density, so that it ended up looking rather more like a Christmas bush than a tree. Ralph, James, Rose, and Victoire spent most of the day before Christmas Eve stringing popcorn, decorating the tree, and wrapping presents. That night, Hermione gathered the entire household with the intention of bundling everyone up and going Christmas caroling. Neither Ron nor Harry, however, were particularly overjoyed about the idea.

"Give us a break, Hermione," Harry said, dropping into an easy chair by the fire. "We've been on our feet all day."

"Yeah," Ron chimed in, bolstered a bit, "it's just the start of the holiday. We haven't even had a chance to sit down yet, have we?"

"Ronald Weasley, you get your bottom into your coat and hat," Hermione replied, tossing Ron's things onto his lap. "We only get the whole family together once a year anymore, if we're lucky, and I'm not going to let you sit on your bum all night just as if you were at home. Besides," she added a bit truculently, "you said on the way here that you thought caroling sounded fun."

"That was before I knew you were serious," Ron muttered, climbing to his feet and shrugging on his coat.

"You too," Ginny smiled, grabbing Harry's hand and pulling him out of the chair. "You can lounge around all Christmas day if you wish. Tonight, we're going to have some fun, whether you like it or not."

Harry groaned, but allowed Ginny to work his coat onto him. She punched him playfully in the stomach and he grinned, grabbing his scarf. To Ron's and Harry's apparent annoyance, Bill was raring to go, performing scales in the hallway, his hand on his chest. Fleur, dressed as resplendently as her daughter, smiled adoringly at him. As they headed out the door, James heard Uncle Ron mutter to his dad, "I swear he acts like that as much to spite us as to impress her."

The night had turned out so perfectly and quintessentially Christmas-like that James wondered if his mum and Aunt Hermione had somehow bewitched it. Fat, silent snowflakes had begun to fall, muffling the distant city sounds and blanketing the grimy walls and sidewalks with sparkling white. Hermione passed out sheets of music, and then arranged everyone so that the youngest were in front and the oldest and tallest were in back. "If Mum weren't still around," Ron said to Harry in a low voice, "I'd swear Hermione was channeling her." During a practice chorus, Hermione became annoyed at Ted, who insisted on singing amusing variations of the lyrics, to the great delight of Albus and Hugo. Finally satisfied, she led the troupe through the streets surrounding Grimmauld Place, ringing doorbells and directing the choruses. Most of the Muggles who answered their doors stood and listened with something like strained amusement on their faces.

Once, an old man with a large hearing aid yelled at them that he didn't support any charities except the Hortense Home for Feral Felines, and then slammed his door.

"McGonagall owes him a Christmas card, then," Ted said, barely missing a beat.

James waved a hand at Ralph before he could ask. "Animagus. I'll explain later."

Christmas morning dawned with dazzling brightness, the sun turning the snow-frosted windows into blinding tableaux. Ralph and James met Albus and Rose on their way down the steps to breakfast.

"It's no use," Rose said dolefully. "Mum swears she'll *Crucio* anyone who tries to open a present before breakfast."

James blinked. "Aunt Hermione said that?"

"Well," answered Albus, "not in so many words. But she's really in a snit ever since she caught us using a pair of Uncle George's z-ray spectacles on the presents to see what was in them. She just about turned Dementor on him. It was scary!"

"Uncle George is here?" James asked, trotting down the rest of the stairs and heading for the kitchen. "Excellent!"

"Yeah, but he brought Katie Bell with him," Albus said, pronouncing the name with his most ingratiatingly snarky voice. Albus didn't so much disapprove of Katie Bell as he disapproved of anyone threatening to alter George Weasley's impish bachelorhood.

As James and Ralph turned the corner into the old kitchen, they heard George's voice saying, "That's the sort of publicity that has allowed triple W to grow to two locations and become the wizarding world's leading joke shop, you know. You can't turn down a primo showstopper at a broadcast event like the debate. It's all about the spectacle."

Katie Bell, an attractive woman with long brown hair, stirred her tea. "You should've heard the way Myron Madrigal described it on the wireless," she said, stifling a smile.

Ted scowled, then his curiosity got the better of him. "What'd he say?"

"He called it 'a puerile display of monumental poor taste,'" George said proudly, raising his juice glass in a toast.

"That's beautiful!" Ted grinned, clinking his glass to George's.

"James, good to see you!" George said, clapping his juice onto the table and patting the seat next to him. "Have a seat and tell us how the old alma mater is treating you."

"Great," James said, sitting down and grabbing a piece of toast. "George, this is my friend, Ralph."

“Oh, we know all about you, don’t we?” George said, leaning toward Ralph and tapping the side of his nose. “Our man on the inside, eh? Infiltrating the slimy underbelly of the Slytherin war machine. Spying and sabotaging left and right, no doubt.”

Ralph rolled his eyes at Ted.

“I didn’t say anything,” Ted said primly. “I happened to mention to him that you were on Team B, way back when we ordered our little surprise package. He figured out the rest on his own when he found out you were here.”

Ralph squirmed. “Well, that’s not really true, you know. I’m just a kid.”

“Never underestimate what a kid can do, Ralphie,” George said seriously.

“That’s right,” Katie nodded. “George and his brother, Fred, caused the best class disruption in Hogwarts history in the middle of the reign of Umbridge the Terrible.”

“Like I said, it’s all about the spectacle,” George said.

“With a little revenge thrown in,” Katie said, smiling.

“How dare you even suggest such a thing?”

Ralph and James exchanged looks.

James, Ralph, Ted, and George were the last at the breakfast table. The younger siblings and cousins fairly dragged them from the table, finally getting the entire household together for the opening of the presents.

“Didn’t you do like I told you?” George said, laughing as Albus pulled him into the parlor. “Open the presents in the middle of the night and then re-wrap them again with the *Reparo* charm?”

“I *tried!*” Albus replied earnestly. “I nicked James’ wand and practiced on a box of biscuits. Couldn’t get it to work! Made no end of a mess. Mum just about thrashed me.”

“You nicked my wand!” James cried, lunging after Albus. “I’ll thrash you myself! Give it back!”

Hooting, Albus darted away with James in pursuit.

There was much yelling and shredding of paper, and James couldn’t help thinking that Christmas at Grimmauld Place probably wasn’t much different than Zane’s description of his family Christmas in the States, hinkypunks and all. When the younger Weasleys and Potters had all opened their presents and scampered off to enjoy them, the rest of the gifts were opened with a bit more reserve. Harry had gotten Ginny an unusual new cauldron, which she unwrapped and stared at rather blankly.

“It’s a Conjure-Pot,” he explained, a little defensively. “It makes dinner a snap! You just throw in a few ingredients each morning, whatever you have left lying around the cupboard. It doesn’t matter what. The Conjure-Pot figures out the best dish to make with it, prepares it, and cooks it up during the day. We all come home at night and voila, mystery meal. Great for the working mum on the go.”

“At least that’s what the sign on the display at Tristan’s and Tupperworth’s said,” Ron remarked, grinning. Harry clipped him on the back of the head.

Fleur sniffed. “Vere I come from, eet is considered improper for a man to buy cookery as a gift.”

“That’s because where you come from, my dear,” Bill said gently, “the men do most of the cooking.”

“Oh, just open the next one,” Harry said, annoyed.

Ginny’s next present turned out to be a pair of mer-pearl earrings, which went over much better. Ginny seemed simultaneously distraught and overjoyed by them.

“Harry! How did you pay for these? Mer-pearl! I never expected...!” Her eyes glittered as she blinked back tears.

“Just put them on,” Harry smiled. “If it makes you feel any better, they’re fake. Leprechaun-pearl. They came as a bonus gift with the Conjure-Pot.”

“No, they didn’t,” she smiled, and kissed him.

Ron had gotten Hermione a small but apparently expensive bottle of perfume called *Whimsies’ Enchantment*, which Hermione was very pleased with. Ginny and Hermione had gone together to buy Harry and Ron tickets to the Quidditch World Cup.

“We knew you’d both been wanting to go for the past several years,” Hermione explained as Harry and Ron congratulated each other. “But you never think ahead to get advanced tickets. We’ve got eight total tickets, so you can take the kids, if you wish. They’d love it. And your wives, of course, if you wished. It’s up to you.”

But Harry and Ron had fallen into a debate about what teams would be in the Cup and barely heard the last.

James opened his present and was surprised to see that his parents had gotten him a new broom.

“Wow,” he breathed. “A Thunderstreak! Mum, Dad, you got me a Thunderstreak?”

“Well,” Harry said slowly, “I knew you’d had some trouble getting started on the broom, but I spoke to your friend, Zane, and he said you were coming along really well. I thought you might like to practice on your own broom. Those school brooms are too old. Slow, unwieldy, and the handling’s gone all mushy. You try this out and I think you’ll notice the difference straight off.”

“Course, if you don’t want it,” George offered, “you could always trade with Ted. That old Nimbus of his may be slow as a flobberworm, but it has *loads* of antique value.”

Ted hurled a ball of wrapping paper at George, hitting him square in the face.

James felt a little sorry for Ralph, who had not heard from his dad since the message that he’d be travelling over the holidays. Ralph shrugged it off, saying his dad had probably sent his Christmas gift to the school. James and Ralph were both surprised when Ginny handed Ralph a small, wrapped package.

“It’s not much,” Ginny smiled, “but we thought you might enjoy it.”

Ralph unwrapped the package and looked at it. It was a very dog-eared and dilapidated book, the words on the cover almost illegible with age. It was called *Advanced Potion-Making*.

“That belonged to a great Slytherin, like you’ll be, no doubt,” Harry said somberly. “Frankly, I thought I’d lost it, but it turned up a few weeks ago. I didn’t know what to do with it until you came for the holiday. Then it just made sense that you should have it. Don’t let Professor Slughorn see it, though. Just use it as a... reference.”

Ralph flipped carefully through the old book. The margins were crammed with hand-written notations and drawings. “Who wrote all this stuff inside?”

“Doesn’t really matter,” Harry said cryptically. “You don’t know him. Just take care of it, and be careful how you use some of the stuff in there. It can be a little... dodgy, sometimes. Still, it just seems right that it should be in the hands of a good Slytherin man. Happy Christmas, Ralph.”

Ralph thanked Harry and Ginny, a bit puzzled at the serious looks both he and the book were getting. He recognized that, mysterious as the book was, it was apparently rather meaningful. He wrapped it in a piece of cloth Ginny gave him and placed it in the bottom of his trunk.

James was delighted when Neville and Luna Lovegood arrived that afternoon. The two had been seeing each other for the past few months, but James had heard his mum tell Andromeda Tonks that it wasn’t going anywhere. James couldn’t guess how his mum knew such things, but he never doubted that she was right. For James’ part, Neville and Luna seemed just a bit too brotherly and sisterly to be a couple.

After dinner, Grandmum Weasley appeared in the fireplace to wish everyone a happy Christmas.

“We’re having a perfectly delightful time here with Charlie,” she said from the grate. “And Prague is just lovely. I think you boys need to have a talk with your father, though. He’s gotten rather enamored with the Muggle architecture here and is talking about staying on a few more weeks. He’s become so unpredictable now that he’s retired from the Ministry. Oh, it is so difficult having you kids all over the world like this. How am I supposed to keep track of my grandbabies?”

“How are Charlie and Claire and the kids, then, Molly?” Hermione asked, gently steering the topic to pleasanter subjects.

“Quite well, although Charlie insists on taking little Harold and Jules to work with him on occasion. How these poor children can endure the sight of such creatures and not have constant nightmares is simply beyond me.”

James, who’d met his younger cousins, Harold and Jules, a few times, knew that it was likely that they, in fact, might give nightmares to the dragons rather than the other way around.

Late that evening, as most of the household was beginning to drift to bed, James and Ralph found themselves seated near the fire with Luna Lovegood, who was telling them about her latest expedition into the Highland Mountains in search of the Umgubular Slashkilter.

“Still no positive identification,” she said, “but I discovered a vast network of their tracks and leavings. Their diet seems to consist almost entirely of blusterwermgs and figgles, so it’s pretty easy to identify their dung by smell alone. Sort of pepperminty. Not at all unpleasant.”

“Unglubulous... slashkillers?” Ralph attempted.

“Close enough,” Luna said kindly. “They’re a species of flightless raptor, distantly related to hippogriffs and octogators. I took a mold of one of their tracks and a stool sample from one of their leavings. Would you like to smell it?”

“Luna,” James said, leaning forward in his chair and lowering his voice, “can we ask you a question about something? I’d rather nobody else knew about it.”

“I specialize in things nobody else knows about,” Luna said mildly.

“I mean, I want to keep it sort of a secret.”

“Oh,” Luna said, her face placid. James waited, but Luna merely watched him, smiling politely. Luna, he recalled, occasionally had a rather unique approach to conversation. He decided to plow on.

“This isn’t about Slashkilters or Wrackspurts or anything. Really, it’d be a better question for your dad, if he was still around, but I bet you know the answer, too. What can you tell us about... about Austramaddux and Merlinus Ambrosius?”

Luna was the only completely unshockable person James knew. She merely looked into the fire and said, “Ahh, yes, not exactly my specialty. A lifelong hobby of my father’s, though. Austramaddux was the historian who recorded the last days of Merlinus and his promised return, of course. The subject of much speculation and intrigue for centuries, you know.”

“Yeah,” James said, “we know. We read about him and the prediction of his return. What we’re wondering is how it could happen? What would it take?”

Luna looked thoughtful. “It’s a pity my father isn’t here. He could speak on the subject for days. He did once, in fact, at a gathering of alternative magical publishers and broadcasters in Belfast. Gave a speech on the implications of the Merlinus conspiracies and their hypothetical plausibilities, if I recall. It went on for three and half days, until he fell asleep at the podium. Actually, I think that he was asleep long before anyone realized it. He was a notorious sleep-talker. Gave more than a few of his speeches in a nightgown. Most people thought it was eccentricity, but I think he was just multi-tasking.” She sighed fondly.

James knew he wouldn’t have much time before someone else, George, or worse, his dad or mum, would come back into the room. “Luna, what did he say about it? Did he think Merlin’s return was possible?”

“Oh, he certainly did. Had a hundred theories about it. Hoped he’d live to see the day, in fact, although even he wasn’t any too sure that when Merlinus returned, he’d be anything like what we’d call a good wizard. Wrote a whole series of articles for *The Quibbler* explaining the three relics and offering a hundred Galleon reward for anyone with valid clues to their whereabouts.”

James tried not to interrupt Luna. “What are the three relics?”

“Oh,” Luna said, looking at him. “I thought you’d read about it?”

Ralph spoke up. “We did, but it didn’t say anything about any relics. It just said that Merlin would leave the world of men and return when the time was ripe for him, or something.”

“Ah, well, that’s the key, then, isn’t it?” Luna said placidly. “The relics determine when the time is ripe. Merlin’s three required magical elements, his throne, his robe and his staff. He left them in the charge of Austramaddux. According to the prediction, once the three relics are brought together again in a place called the ‘Hall of Elders’ Crossing’, Merlinus will reappear to claim them.”

James gasped. *The Hall of Elder’s Crossing*, he thought, remembering the legend inscribed on the gate of the secret island. He felt his heart pounding and was sure Luna would hear it in his voice. He struggled to sound merely curious. “So what became of Merlin’s three relics, then?”

“No one knows for sure,” Luna replied airily, “but my father had developed some pretty strong theories. According to legend, Merlin’s ceremonial black robe was made of incorruptible fabric, allowing it to survive eternally. It was supposedly used as a caulk over the body of Kreagle, the first king of the wizarding world, in the belief that it would prevent corruption. Alas, no one knows the location of Kreagle’s tomb, its Secret-Keepers having been inhumed within it to secure its secrecy forever.” Ralph shuddered as Luna went on. “Merlin’s throne as advisor to the kingdoms of the Muggles was passed from regime to regime, always kept ready for the wizard’s return, until it was eventually lost in the mists of time. Some believe that it was recovered by a wizarding king in the sixteen hundreds, and that it is stored today in the Ministry of Magic, forgotten in the endless vaults of the Department of Mysteries. Finally,” Luna said, narrowing her eyes as she searched her memory, “the greatest of Merlin’s relics, his staff. Back then, wizards used staffs rather than

wands, you know. Long sticks, often as tall as the wizard himself. Merlin's was carved from the trunk of a rare talking knucklewood tree. It is said that he could still make his staff speak with the voice of the dryad that had given it. Austramaddux kept the staff himself, claiming to be its sole keeper until the day of Merlin's returning. He hid it, and the secret of its location is said to have died with him."

"Wow," Ralph said in a low voice.

"But still," James said, "say someone could get all the relics back together again. Where is this Hall of Elder's Crossing supposed to be?"

"Again, no one knows," Luna replied. "Austramaddux speaks of it as if he expects his readers to know of it, as if it were a well-known place. Perhaps it was then, but it has been completely lost to us now."

"But your father believed it would be possible to bring Merlinus back? He thought it could happen?" James prodded.

For the first time, Luna's face became serious. She looked at James. "My father believed in quite a wide variety of things, James, not all of them technically consistent with reality. He did believe in the return of Merlinus. He also believed in the healing power of Nargle warts, the fountain of pleasing breath, and the existence of an entire subterranean civilization of half-human creatures he called Mordmunks. In other words, just because my father believed it, that hardly makes it true."

"Yeah, I guess," James said, but distractedly.

Luna went on. "No wizard has ever overcome death. Many have cheated it for a while, using arts ranging from the creative to the questionable to the outright evil. But no single wizard in all of history has tasted death and returned to tell about it. It is the law of mortality. One life, one death."

James nodded, but he was barely listening anymore. His mind was reeling. Finally, Ginny peeked in and sent both boys off to bed.

"So what do you think?" Ralph asked as they passed the curtained portrait of old Mrs. Black and climbed the stairs. "You still think there's a big Merlin conspiracy?"

James nodded. "Definitely. Remember our first Defense Against the Dark Arts class? When Professor Jackson came in to talk to Professor Franklyn about something? They were both standing up front, then the voodoo queen popped in to tell Jackson his class was waiting for him. Remember?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, you know that case that Jackson carries with him pretty much everywhere? I got a look into it. It came open a little and it was only a few feet away from me. There was a big bundle of some kind of black cloth in it. Jackson saw me looking and gave me a look that'd melt lead!"

James opened the door to his room and Ralph threw himself onto his cot. "So? I don't get it."

“Remember what I told you about the night I hid under the Invisibility Cloak and followed Dad and Professor Franklyn around? Franklyn told Dad that he should keep an eye on Professor Jackson. He said that Jackson was involved in the whole anti-Auror propaganda movement. Don’t you see?”

Ralph frowned again, thinking hard. “I don’t know. I can’t believe Professor Jackson would be part of a plot to start a war against the Muggles. He’s hardcore, but he seems cool.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but Ralph, you know what I think that thing in his case was? I think it was one of the relics! I think it was Merlin’s robe! He’s keeping it safe until he can get the rest of the relics together.”

Ralph’s eyes widened. “No!” he said in a low whisper. “Can’t be! I mean, Professor Jackson...!”

“That’s not all,” James said, digging into his backpack. “Take a look at this.” He pulled out the folded *Daily Prophet* that Zane had given him, the one with the cover story about the demonstration against Harry Potter’s visit. “It’s been in the bottom of my bag this whole time. I’d forgotten why I even kept it, but take a look at the article on the back.” James tapped the article about the break-in at the Ministry of Magic and the strangely cursed thieves who had apparently not gotten around to stealing anything. Ralph read it slowly, then looked up at James, his eyes large.

“It says one of the places they broke into was the Department of Mysteries,” he said. “You think these guys were looking for the Merlin throne?”

“Maybe,” James admitted, thinking hard. “But I don’t think so. I think they were hired as a diversion. It says none of them had much of a prior record, right? They couldn’t have broken into the Ministry on their own. I think maybe they were just a distraction, ruffling things around and playing a bit of havoc while someone *else* found the throne and got it out of there.”

“But it says here nothing was stolen,” Ralph said, glancing back at the article.

“Well, they wouldn’t admit that the throne of Merlin had been taken, would they?” James replied. “I mean, that’d be a pretty scary bit of dark magic to admit had gone missing, what with all the stories of evil wizards trying to use the relics to bring back Merlin all these centuries past. Then again,” he thought back to what Luna had told them, “if it had been stored in the vaults of the Department of Mysteries since the sixteen hundreds, maybe they didn’t even know it was there anymore. How would they know if one item had gone missing from the place? Luna called them the ‘endless vaults’, didn’t she?”

“So,” Ralph said, still scanning the news article, “somebody hires these three goons to break in and make a mess of things, while the real thieves make off with the throne of Merlin. Then the real thieves curse these guys not to be able to talk, and set them up to take the fall. Right? Pretty sneaky. But still, where do you hide something like Merlin’s throne? Don’t powerful magical objects, especially dark ones, make a pretty noticeable imprint? I mean, your dad and his Aurors would’ve picked up on it somehow, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah,” James agreed doubtfully, “they’d have to put it someplace either really far away from civilization or hide it under loads of Disillusionment Charms and Secrecy Spells. More than just any old witch or wizard could whip up. They’d need a place totally protected and absolutely secret, like…” He stopped, realization dawning on him. His mouth hung open and his eyes grew wider and wider.

“What?” Ralph finally asked. James glanced at him, and then grabbed the newspaper from him. He turned it around, examining the front page.

“That’s it!” he said in a breathless whisper. “Look! The break-in happened the night before we arrived at school! Remember when we were on the boats crossing the lake for the first time? I saw somebody in a boat over by the lake’s edge!”

“Yeah,” Ralph said slowly, narrowing his eyes, “I guess. The next day, when the Americans arrived, you saw old Madame Delacroix and thought it’d been her. I thought you were being a bit of a nutter.”

James ignored him and went on, “I decided it couldn’t have been her, because the woman I’d seen on the lake had been a lot younger. Still, the resemblance had been pretty scary. You know where I saw that boat, though? It was over by where Zane and I found the island! The Grotto Keep! I think that *was* Madame Delacroix, after all!”

“How?” Ralph asked simply. “She didn’t arrive until the next day.”

James explained to Ralph what Professor Franklyn had revealed about Madame Delacroix at the dinner in the Alma Aleron’s quarters. “It was her wraith,” he concluded. “She projected herself to the lake, to that place on the island, using the ability Franklyn told us about. No wonder she was so mad when he explained that she could project a younger version of herself anywhere she wanted!”

Ralph seemed doubtful. “But why? What’d she want to be doing floating around in a boat on the lake?”

“Don’t you see?” James exclaimed, trying to keep his voice low. “Whoever stole the Merlin throne would need to hide it in a place so secure and secret that nobody would ever sense it. What better place to hide it than right on the grounds of Hogwarts? Why create an ultra-powerful hiding place when one already exists and you’re going to be there anyway? Madame Delacroix sent her wraith to the island that night to deliver the stolen throne. She’s hiding it right on the Hogwarts grounds, there on the island. The Forbidden Forest is already so full of magic that the throne is probably just lost in the background noise to the wizards at the school. The Grotto Keep must be the hiding place!”

Ralph stared at James, biting his lips and wide-eyed. Finally he said, “Wow, that’s so creepy it makes sense. So you think she’s working with Jackson, then?”

“One way or another, they’re in it together,” James nodded.

“That stinks,” Ralph said flatly. “I was really starting to like Professor Jackson. But still, what’s the big deal, really? I mean, Luna said that it’s impossible to bring Merlin back. She pretty much made it sound like anyone who thinks they can do it is right loony. Once dead, always dead. Why not let Delacroix and Jackson have their fantasies?”

James couldn’t let it go. He shook his head. “I don’t know about Delacroix, but Professor Jackson’s smarter than that. He teaches Technomancy, doesn’t he? He wouldn’t fall for some crackpot scheme if he didn’t think it’d work. Besides, everybody keeps talking about it as if Merlin had died. But Austramaddux doesn’t say he died, does he? He just left the world of men.”

Ralph shrugged. “Whatever. Seems pretty dodgy to me.” He flopped backwards onto the cot.

“Come on, Ralph!” James said, tossing the old newspaper onto him. “They’re trying to bring Merlin back so they can start a war with the Muggles! It’s up to us to stop it!”

Ralph rolled onto his side and furrowed his brow at James. “What do you mean? Your dad’s Head Auror. If you’re really worried about it, tell him about it. It’s his job to stop things like this, isn’t it? What’re we going to do, anyway?”

James was exasperated. “We can try to stop them! Nobody will believe us if we tell them now. We can try to capture the relics ourselves. If we do that, then we’ll at least have proof!”

Ralph continued to stare at James. After a minute he spoke. “Don’t you think you might be making a bit much of this? I mean, I understand wanting to follow in your dad’s footsteps and all, trying to save the world and be the hero...”

“Shut up, Ralph,” James said, suddenly angry. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ralph rolled onto his back. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.” James knew that, after their earlier fight, Ralph was sensitive not to say anything too argumentative.

“All right,” James admitted, “I know why you’re saying that. But this is different. I’m really not just trying to be like Dad, all right? Maybe there isn’t any way to bring back Merlin. But still, these Progressive Element types are up to no good. If we can prove that they’re trying to start a war, we can at least shut them down, can’t we? If we can do that, I think we should. Are you with me?”

Ralph grinned at James. “Of course. What’s the fun of being a wizard if we aren’t on a quest to save the world?”

James rolled his eyes. “Shut up and go to sleep, Ralphinator.”

But James couldn’t sleep, not for a long time. He thought and thought about everything he’d learned that night, the connections he and Ralph had made. It made too much sense. It had to be true. And as much as he trusted Luna, he couldn’t quite accept that it would be impossible to bring Merlin into the

world somehow. He'd been the greatest wizard ever, hadn't he? He was sure to have been capable of things that even the most powerful wizards since would find impossible. James felt a strong unwillingness to let it go. Still, part of him had been pricked by Ralph's suggestion that James was simply looking for a way to be a hero, like his dad. Not because he knew it wasn't true, but because he was afraid it might be. Finally, several hours after the house had fallen silent, feeling confused and exhausted, James drifted to sleep.



The day before the trip back to school, James was wandering the upper rooms of Grimmauld Place, bored and restless. The last of the guests had left the previous day, and Ralph had gone with Ted and Victoire to see Harry's offices at the Ministry. James had been there loads of times, but his primary reason for not accompanying them was that he wanted time to think. After half an hour of lying on his bed and scribbling meaningless notes and drawings on sheets of parchment, he'd given up and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. The top floors were silent and sleepy, with motes of dust swimming lazily in the sunbeams that streamed through the frosted windows. All the beds were made, the trunks mostly packed. Everyone would be leaving Grimmauld Place in the next few days, reducing it once again to temporary emptiness. Even Kreacher had been induced to accompany the family back to the main house in Marble Arch for a couple of months. The age and quiet of the house seemed to fill the rooms, fog-like. James felt like a ghost.

He was passing the door to his parents' bedroom when he stopped. He took a step backwards and peered in. The curtains were thrown wide open and a hard beam of sunlight speared the air, laying a window-shaped spotlight on Harry Potter's trunk. James glanced toward the hall stairs to be sure no one was coming, and then tiptoed into the room. The trunk wasn't completely closed. It didn't even have a lock. James lifted the lid slowly, peering in. There, in the same place it was last time, was his dad's Invisibility Cloak. It was folded tightly, packed into a corner, almost covered by a pile of socks. James glanced again at the doorway, already feeling guilty. He shouldn't do it, of course. Absolutely not. When his dad found out, there'd be trouble. But then again, maybe his dad wouldn't notice. Harry Potter seemed to carry the legendary cloak with him merely by force of habit. James couldn't remember the last time his dad had actually used it. It seemed wrong, somehow, that such a useful treasure was not being put to use by someone. James reached in and touched it, then, without allowing himself to think about it, he pulled the cloak out. He was about to turn and flee back to his bedroom, when something else inside the trunk captured his eye. He caught his breath as he looked, barely allowing himself to believe what he was seeing. It had been packed beneath the Invisibility Cloak, only revealed when James pulled it out. Few people would even recognize

what it was. At first glance, it was merely an old parchment, folded many times. Like a map. James considered it. What finally decided him was the thought of what Ted Lupin might say if he knew that James had turned down such a golden opportunity.

James grabbed the Marauder's Map, clutching it and the Invisibility Cloak to his chest, then carefully closed his dad's trunk. He ran down the steps and back into his bedroom. By the time he'd hidden his contraband in the bottom of his own trunk, he was feeling both excited and frightened in equal measures. There was sure to be a row when he was found out, and there was no question that he *would* be found out. Still, he knew that his dad wouldn't be able to deny that he himself would have done the same thing if he'd been in James' shoes. He was counting on that to temper things when the time came. Until then, he'd put both items to great use. He didn't know exactly how, yet, but there was no question that, with the Invisibility Cloak *and* the Marauder's Map in his possession, he felt much better equipped to tackle whatever adventures were sure to come.



The return trip to school was, like all post-holiday journeys, melancholy and quiet. Back at Hogwarts the next week, James and Ralph relayed to Zane everything Luna had told them and the connections they had subsequently made. James was gratified that Zane immediately grasped the implications.

"Maybe Madame Delacroix's put the Imperius Curse on Jackson?" he asked in a low tone as the three boys huddled around a table in the corner of the library.

"Yeah," Ralph agreed. "That'd make sense. She could just be using him as a tool."

James shook his head. "Dad says the Imperius Curse is pretty easy to cast, but it takes a lot of willpower to maintain it over a long period of time. The whole school year is a *long* time. Also, a strong enough wizard can learn to throw it off or resist it altogether. Jackson's too sharp to be an easy target for something like that."

Ralph shrugged, and then leaned in, lowering his voice as a group of students walked past. "Either way, I still think the whole thing's a wash. I mean, wizards have been trying to get Merlin back for centuries, haven't they? And the best wizards alive today believe that the whole thing is just a sort of fairy tale. Professor Franklyn said in D.A.D.A. that the best records show that Merlin ended up getting involved with

something called 'the Lady of the Lake' who took his powers and imprisoned him. Could just be part of the legend, but still, supposedly he died around twelve hundred and was buried just like anyone else."

Zane, who was always prone to the morbid imagination, widened his eyes. "What if the plan is to bring him back as an Inferius? Maybe they're just going to raise his body like some kind of zombie or something!"

James rolled his eyes. "Inferi are just animated corpses. Nobody would say somebody had been brought back to life if they'd just been turned into an Inferius. It'd be the same thing as just grabbing Merlin's skull and working it like a puppet."

Zane held up his hand and mimed a mouth with his fingers, "Hey, dudes. I'm Merlin. I just flew back from the dead, and boy, are my arms tired?"

James stifled a laugh. "All right, so seriously, maybe the whole Merlin's return thing is just some crazy legend. Jackson and Delacroix and whoever they're working with in the Progressive Element believe in it, and as long as they do, they'll keep at it. Even if the plan to bring back Merlin doesn't work, they'll just figure something else out. If we can prove what they are trying to do, though..."

"We can at least shut them down," Ralph nodded. "Right? Discredit them with the wizarding world?"

"Yeah. And if we can do that, we take away a lot of their ability to accomplish their goal."

Zane laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. "So looks like we need to get our hands on those relics. The throne is too protected for us to get to, if it's on that island. We don't yet know who has the Merlin staff or if anybody even knows where it is. That leaves the robe. At least we know where it is, and as far as we know, Jackson's case won't try to bite our legs off if we open it."

Ralph looked grim. "As far as we know."

"We need to be able to get it without Jackson knowing it's gone. If he catches on, they'll have time to back off and cover their tracks," James said, thinking hard. "I just wish we knew when they were planning on bringing all the relics together. We have to get them before they try it."

"And where's this Hall of Elder's Crossing?" Ralph added.

"I figured it's got to be the island itself," James answered, raising his eyebrows.

It was Zane's turn to shake his head. "Nah. Can't be. The sign on the gate said that it was the Grotto Keep. At the bottom, it said something about the Hall of Elder's Crossing, as if it was someplace else."

James dug in his backpack, finding the sheet of parchment he and Zane had recreated the gate poem on. He spread it between them. In the light of what Luna had told them about the relics, the poem made a lot more sense. They read it, along with their scribbled notes, once again.

When by the light of Sulva bright -- *sulva = moon*

I found the Grotto Keep; -- *means can only find the Keep by moonlight*

Before the night of time requite -- *time requite? A certain date?*

Did wake his languid sleep. -- *Merlinus; sleeping? Rip Van Winkle*

Upon return the fretted dawn -- *happens at nighttime?*

With not a relic lossing; -- *the three relics! Brought back together*

Bygone a life, a new eon, -- *a life from the past in a new time; the legend's origin?*

The Hall of Elder's Crossing. -- *here? where?*

"Yeah," James agreed reluctantly. "It makes it sound like the Hall of Elder's Crossing is a different place entirely. Maybe the Grotto Keep *becomes* the Hall of Elder's Crossing, somehow?"

Zane shrugged, unconvinced, "Meh."

"Doesn't make any difference, really," Ralph said after a minute's thought. "It's just some old poem. Part of the legend."

"You didn't see the island," Zane said with feeling, then, turning to James, "You think that whole Grotto Keep grew up there on the island in response to the throne being there?"

"Could be," James nodded. "Whether the legend's true or not, that thing's got to have some serious magic in it. Probably, Madame Delacroix has added her own protective hexes and charms as well."

"Either way," Ralph insisted, "we need to get the robe from Jackson's briefcase. Any ideas?"

All three boys merely looked at one another. Finally, James said, "I'll work on a plan. We're going to need something to replace the robe with, though."

"It was just a hunk of black fabric, you say?" Ralph said. "We can use my dress cloak. My dad got me the entire wizard wardrobe when we were in Diagon Alley before school started, and unless I have to go to somebody's wedding or funeral, I can't imagine I'll need that thing. It's bigger than my bedspread."

James considered it. “Sure, I guess it’ll work as well as anything. Although,” he added, looking seriously at Ralph, “if they trace it back to you...”

Ralph was silent for a moment, and then shrugged. “Ah, well. I’ve got no shortage of enemies already. One or two more can’t hurt much.”

Considering the caliber of enemy Ralph might make with such a plot, James thought it might hurt indeed, but he decided not to say so. He was proud of Ralph for volunteering, and he felt that it showed that Ralph had a great deal of confidence in James. James hoped he was worthy of it.

For the rest of the week, James had very little time to think about Jackson’s briefcase and the relic robe. As if he knew what they were up to, Professor Jackson had piled on more homework than usual, assigning nearly five chapters and a five hundred-word essay on Hechtor’s Law of Displaced Inertia. At the same time, Professor Franklyn had planned a practical examination for late Friday afternoon, leaving only one day for James, Zane, and Ralph to practice Disarming and Blocking Spells. Ralph was forced to practice on a fencing dummy. After two hours, he finally succeeded in casting an *Expelliarmus* spell without burning a crater in the clothbound mannequin. Fortunately, Franklyn himself deigned to act as Ralph’s dueling partner during the practical. Ralph, slightly more confident that Franklyn could deflect any errant spells than any of his classmates, was able to concentrate a bit more on his wandwork. To no one’s greater surprise than his own, his *Expelliarmus* spell actually succeeded in blasting Franklyn’s wand from his hand. It vibrated in the ceiling like an arrow.

“Well done, Mr. Deedle,” Franklyn said, a bit faintly, gazing up at his wand. “Mr. Potter, would you be so kind as to retrieve my wand for me? There’s a ladder by the supply closet. That’s a lad.”

As James and Ralph were leaving the Defense Against the Dark Arts practical, James noticed that he was once again being watched closely by the mustachioed man in the painting of wizards gathered around the large globe. For the past week, he had begun noticing similar looks from paintings throughout the halls. Not all the paintings, by any means, but enough to nag at his attention. The fat wizard in the corner of the table at the painting of the poisoning of Peracles had seemed to listen intently as he, Ralph, and Zane had discussed Jackson’s briefcase in the library. A cavalry rider in the painting of the Battle of Bourgenoigne had cantered his horse to the corner of the painting to watch James out of sight as he’d walked to Muggle Studies. Perhaps strangest of all, a portrait of a portrait in the painting of the crowning of King Cyciphus had studied James unabashedly from the wall of the Great Hall as he and Zane were eating breakfast.

James stopped on his way to the common room and approached the painting of the wizards gathered around the globe. The wizard with the dark mustache and spectacles peered at him with a hard, unreadable expression.

“What?” James demanded. “Do I have mustard on my tie or something?”

The painted wizard’s expression didn’t change, and once again, James found that there was something teasingly familiar about him.

“I know you, somehow,” he said. “Who are you?”

“You’re talking to a painting,” Ralph pointed out.

“I talk to a painting every day to get into the common room,” James said without turning around.

“Yeah,” Ralph nodded. “Still, it just seems a little weird to go around starting arguments with random paintings in the halls.”

“Where do I know you from?” James asked the painting, annoyed.

“Young man,” another wizard in the painting spoke up, “that’s hardly the tone we are accustomed to being addressed in. Respect and deference, if you please. We are your elders.”

James ignored him, still studying the wizard with the mustache and spectacles, who merely stared back at him silently. It occurred to James that the wizard only seemed familiar because, somehow, he looked like the rest of the paintings that had been watching him. But that was obviously ridiculous, wasn’t it? There was the fat man with the bald head, and the thin wizard in the portrait of the portrait who’d had a great bushy blonde beard. All of the paintings he’d caught watching him were utterly different. A few had even been rather ugly women. Still, there was something about the eyes and the shape of the face. James shook his head. He felt so close to figuring it out, yet it remained beyond his grasp.

“Come on,” Ralph finally said, grabbing James’ arm. “Argue with the paintings later. It’s steak and kidney night.”

That weekend, James gave his new Thunderstreak a test ride on the Quidditch pitch. It was indeed an entirely different experience than riding any of the house brooms. The Thunderstreak was noticeably faster, but more importantly, it responded to James’ direction with an accuracy and ease that bordered on precognition. James would merely think that perhaps he’d like to dip or turn, and suddenly, he’d find that it was happening. Ted explained, rather breathlessly, that the Thunderstreak was equipped with an option called ‘Extra-Gestural Enhancement’.

“Basically,” he said in an awed voice, “the broom can read its owner’s mind, just enough that it only needs the slightest touch to go where you want it to go. It already knows what you want, so the moment you steer, you’re already there.”

James offered to let Ted ride the broom, but Ted shook his head sadly. “It’s bonded with you. You’re the owner. If anybody else tried to fly it, it’d go all wonky. It’s a drawback of the E.G.E. option. Or a plus, if you’re worried about people trying to steal it.”

“Me wantee,” Zane said in a low voice. “How much are they?”

“How much do you have?” Ted asked.

Zane thought for a moment. “Since I gave my last five to the house-elf doorman, er, nothing.”

“It costs more than that,” Ted said, nodding.

On the way back to the castle, Zane told James that he’d had an idea about how to swap the relic robe with Ralph’s dress cloak.

“Meet me tonight in the Ravenclaw common room,” he said. “Tell Ralph to come, too, when you see him. I’ll meet you both at the door at nine.”

That night, the Ravenclaw common room was unusually empty. Zane explained that there was a wizard chess tournament going on in the Great Hall. “Horace Birch is playing Professor Franklyn for the title of grand wizard chess champion of the universe or something. Unofficial, I’m thinking. Anyway, everybody’s down there cheering him on. So have either of you come up with a way to get the robe relic from Jackson yet?”

“I thought you said you had a plan?” James said.

“I do, but it’s pretty iffy. I thought I’d listen to your ideas first, in case they were better.”

James shook his head. Ralph said, “I’ve been watching Professor Jackson. He never lets that briefcase out of his sight.”

“Actually,” Zane said, settling into a chair by the fire, “that’s not entirely true.”

Ralph and James sat on the sofa. James said, “Ralph’s right. He even takes it to Quidditch matches. He sets it between his feet at meals. He’s got it with him constantly.”

“He does have it with him constantly,” Zane agreed, “but there’s one situation where he isn’t exactly keeping his eye on it.”

“What?” James exclaimed. “Where?”

“Technomancy class,” Zane answered simply. “Think about it. What’s he do all class long?”

James considered it a moment, then his eyes widened slightly. “He paces.”

“Bingo,” Zane said, pointing at James. “He puts his case on the floor by his desk, careful as always, but then he paces. He circles the room ten times a class, I bet. I’ve been watching. Takes him about a minute to make it all the way around the room, which means that for about twenty seconds, his back is turned to the briefcase.”

“Wait,” Ralph interjected. “You think we should try to make the switch right in the middle of class?”

Zane shrugged. “Like I said, it isn’t a great idea.”

“How? There’s twenty people in that class. We can’t have them all in on it.”

“No,” James agreed, “Philia Goyle’s in that class. She’s tight with Tabitha Corsica, and it’s possible, even likely, that they’re in on the Merlin plot. Philia may even know what’s in the case. Nobody else can know what we’re up to.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s impossible,” Zane said.

Ralph frowned. “You think we’re going to be able to get into Jackson’s case, swap the robes, and close it again, all while Jackson’s back is turned for twenty seconds, and without anyone else in the class catching on?”

“Hmm,” James said, frowning his brow. “Maybe we don’t need to get *into* the briefcase. What if we find another briefcase? We could stuff Ralph’s cloak in it and somehow just swap the cases while Jackson’s back is turned.”

Ralph was still doubtful. “Jackson will be able to tell. He carries that thing with him everywhere. He’s probably memorized every scratch and scuff on it.”

“Actually,” Zane said thoughtfully, “it’s a pretty standard-looking leather briefcase. I’ve seen others almost exactly like it right here at Hogwarts. If we could find something close enough...” Zane suddenly sat up and snapped his fingers. “Horace!”

“Horace?” James blinked. “Horace Birch? The Gremlin wizard chess player? What’s he got to do with anything?”

Zane shook his head excitedly. “Remember the Wocket? Horace used a *Visum-ineptio* charm to make it look like a flying saucer. It’s a Fool-the-Eye charm! He said it just makes people see what they expect to see. If we found a case that looked enough like Jackson’s, then put a *Visum-ineptio* charm on it, I bet that’d be enough to fool old Stonewall good! I mean, he’d never expect anything to happen to his case during class, so the charm should help him see the fake briefcase as his own. Right?”

Ralph thought about it and seemed to brighten. “That’s so crazy, it just might work.”

“Yeah,” James added, “but still, how do we swap the cases during class without anyone else noticing?”

“We’d need a diversion,” Zane said firmly.

Ralph grimaced. “You’ve watched too much telly.”

James frowned, thinking of the Invisibility Cloak. “You know,” he said, “I think I have an idea.” He told Zane and James about finding the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder’s Map.

“You liberated them from your dad’s trunk!” Zane grinned delightedly. “You little miscreant! Ted will want to kiss you.”

“He doesn’t know, and I want to keep it that way, for now, at least,” James said sternly. “But the point is, I think we can use the Invisibility Cloak to make the switch without anyone knowing. It’ll require all of us, though.”

“I’m not even in that class,” Ralph said.

James nodded. “I know. What class do you have that period? First slot, Wednesday?”

Ralph thought. “Um. Arithmancy. Ugh.”

“Can you miss one?”

“I guess. Why?”

James explained his plan. Zane began to grin, but Ralph looked uncomfortable. “I’m a terrible liar. They’ll catch on straight off,” he moaned. “Can’t Zane do my part? He’s a natural.”

James shook his head. “He’s in the class with me. It’d be no good.”

“You can do it, Ralph,” Zane said heartily. “The trick is to look ‘em straight in the eye and never blink. I’ll teach you everything I know. We’ll make a liar out of you yet.”

That night, as James got ready for bed, he ran through the plan in his mind. Now that he’d allowed himself to consider the impossibility of Merlin’s literal return, he felt rather silly for having been so certain of it. Obviously, it really was just a mad delusion for power-crazed dark wizards. Still, it was evident that Jackson and Delacroix, at least, believed in it enough to try it. If James, Ralph, and Zane could capture the relic robe, that would be enough proof to get his dad and his Aurors to search the island of the Grotto Keep. They’d find the Merlin throne and the conspiracy would be revealed. It’d be front-page news in the *Daily Prophet*, and Tabitha Corsica’s *Progressive Element*, which was surely part of the plot, would be revealed as a campaign of lies and propaganda, intent only on war and domination. With that vision in his head, James felt a stab of determination to do everything he could to capture the relic robe.

As he evaluated the plan, however, he had his doubts. It was certainly a rather convoluted scheme, with loads of variables. Much of it would depend entirely on dumb luck. One minute, James was certain it would work flawlessly, the next, he was sure it would be a ridiculous failure and he, Ralph, and Zane would be caught. What would they say? Jackson would know they were aware of his plan. Would that be enough to stop the plot? James was, after all, the son of the Head Auror. James thought not. If James and his friends were caught trying to steal the relic, Jackson would know they hadn’t yet told Harry Potter anything. Would Jackson and his co-conspirators stoop to murder to keep their plans a secret? He could hardly believe it, but then again, he had been amazed to discover Jackson’s involvement in such a terrible plan to begin with. No matter what, James was sure, probably more than either Zane or Ralph, that the three of them might be in great danger if their scheme failed.

For the first time, he considered telling his dad everything. He could send Nobby with a letter, explaining everything they'd worked out so far. If the three of them succeeded in their plan to capture the relic robe, then he'd have proof to back up the letter. If they failed and were caught, at least someone else would know about the Merlin plot. It was too late to write the letter that night, but he felt reassured that it would be a good idea, and he determined to do it first thing in the morning. Thinking that, he fell asleep. The next morning, however, as he ran down the steps to breakfast, he forgot all about it. In the light of a new day and a new week, he felt perfectly confident that their plan would work. Failure was inconceivable. He was in such high spirits about it that he barely noticed the pale wizard in the painting of the Assumption of Saint Mungo watching him intently, frowning and stone-faced.



12. VISUM-INEPTIO

The first hurdle James, Ralph, and Zane faced in capturing Jackson's briefcase was simply finding a case similar enough to make the switch. It was, as Zane had suggested, a fairly basic black leather case, rather more like a doctor's bag than a briefcase. They studied it carefully at dinner Monday evening, as it sat between the professor's black boots beneath the faculty table. It had two wooden handles on the top, a hinged brass catch, and was, indeed, rather beaten and scuffed. They were dismayed to discover that it had a small, tarnished brass plate riveted to one side with 'T. H. Jackson' engraved on it. While it was, in most respects, an almost entirely unremarkable bit of luggage, the boys soon discovered that there was not, in fact, one exactly like it to be easily found. Plenty of students and faculty had leather cases and portfolios, but they were all either too narrow, or the wrong color, or of a rather different size or shape. By Tuesday night, they had still not found a case they could use to perform the switch. Ralph suggested that they might have to wait until the next week to perform the switch, but James was insistent that they keep trying.

"We don't know when they're planning to bring all the relics together," he explained. "If we wait too long, they'll try it and then we won't have access to any of the relics at all. They'll figure out they don't work, and then hide them or destroy them."

Ralph and Zane agreed, although it didn't get them any closer to finding an appropriate case to use for the switch. Then, Wednesday morning, the day of Technomancy class, Ralph came to the breakfast table with a manic glint in his eye. He plopped down across from Zane and James and stared at them.

"What?" James asked.

"I think I've found a case we can use."

James' mouth dropped open and Zane audibly gulped the coffee he'd been sipping.

"What? Where?" James asked in a harsh whisper. He had decided they were going to have to wait after all, and had been simultaneously worried and relieved. Now adrenaline shot through him. The rather wide-eyed paleness of Ralph's face indicated he was feeling the same thing.

"You know my friend, Rufus Burton?"

James nodded. "Yeah, another first-year Slytherin. Greasy-haired kid, right?"

"Yeah. Well, he collects rocks and stuff. Calls himself a 'rock-hound'. Has a whole bunch of polished little stones arranged on a shelf by his bed: crystals and quartzes and moon-sapphires and all that. I listened to him talking about it last night for almost an hour. Well, he brought all his rock hunting tools along with him to school, of course. He's got a little hammer that's a pick on one side, and a bunch of little scrapers and brushes and loads of these little cloths and polishing solutions."

"All right, all right," Zane said. "We get the picture. Guy's a geek with tools. I'm spellbound. What's the point?"

"Well," Ralph said, unperturbed, "he carries all his tools and gear around in a case. He had it out on his bed last night..."

"And it's the right size and shape?" James prompted.

Ralph nodded, still wide-eyed. "It's almost perfect. Even has a little plaque on the side! It has the name of the manufacturer on it, but it's in the same place as the little plate on Jackson's case. The color's different, and the handles are ivory, but other than that..."

"So how do we get it?" James asked breathlessly.

"I've already got it," Ralph answered, seeming rather amazed at himself. "I told him I wanted a bag to carry my books and parchments in. Told him my backpack didn't feel very, you know, *Slytherin*. He said he knew just what I meant. He said he'd gotten a new toolcase for Christmas, so I could have his old one. That's why he had it out: he was taking everything out of the old one to put into his new case, which is bigger and has a hard dragonskin cover. Watertight, he told me." Ralph was beginning to ramble.

"He just said you could have it?" Zane asked incredulously.

“Yeah! I’ve got to tell you, it wiggled me out a bit. I mean, isn’t that just a little too... I don’t know...”

“A little too much of a coincidence,” Zane nodded.

James grew thoughtfully determined. “Where’s the case now?”

Ralph looked a little startled. “I brought it down with me, but I hid it in one of the cubbyholes under the stairs. I didn’t want anyone to see me with it in here. Just in case.”

“Good thinking. Come on,” James said, getting up.

“You still want to go through with it?” Ralph asked, following reluctantly. “I mean, we were going to wait until next week anyway...”

“That was only because we didn’t have a choice.”

“Well,” Ralph muttered, “there’s always a choice. I mean, we don’t have to do it this way, do we? Couldn’t one of us just hide under the Invisibility Cloak and make the switch when Jackson’s not looking?”

Zane shook his head. “No way. There’s too little room in there. Jackson would run you over doing one of his laps. If we’re going to do it, this is the only way.”

“Look, I think we’re *meant* to do this,” James said, turning to face Ralph and Zane when they got to the doorway. “If there is such a thing as destiny, then that’s what put that case in your hands last night, Ralph. We can’t miss this opportunity. It’d be like... like spitting in destiny’s face.”

Ralph blinked, trying to envision that. Zane scowled thoughtfully. “Sounds serious.”

“You two still with me?” James asked. Both other boys nodded.

The case was still in the cubbyhole beneath the main staircase, and it was as similar to Jackson’s as Ralph had described. It was a ruddy red color, and much more scuffed from having been dragged through the dirt and rocks, but it was exactly the same size and shape, with a matching brass catch in the center. Ralph had already stuffed his dress cloak into it, and when James opened it to check, it looked almost exactly the way the cloth inside Jackson’s case had looked when it had come open that day in Franklyn’s classroom.

“Let’s take it to the boys’ bathroom in the upper cellars,” James said, preceding the other two down the staircase. “It’s just down the hall from Technomancy. Do you need anything special, Zane?”

“Just my wand and my notes,” Zane answered. Horace Birch had been more than happy to explain the *Visum-ineptio* charm to Zane, but there’d been no opportunity for him to practice. Further, the charm would only work--if it worked at all--on anyone who didn’t know the charm was in place. The result was that neither James, Ralph, nor Zane would know if the charm was working. They’d just have to trust Zane’s

spellwork until the switch had been accomplished and Jackson picked up the fake case. Only then, one way or another, would the effectiveness of the charm be shown.

In the boys' bathroom, James plopped the case on the edge of the sink. Zane dug in his backpack for his wand and the bit of parchment he'd scribbled the *Visum-ineptio* incantation on. He handed the parchment to Ralph.

"Hold it up so I can see it," he instructed nervously. His hand was shaking visibly as he pointed his wand at the case. After a moment, he dropped his arm again. "This is all screwy. Ralph's the wand master. Can't he try it?"

"Horace taught it to you," James said impatiently. "It's too late to show Ralph the wand motions. Class is in fifteen minutes."

"Yeah," Zane protested, "but what if I can't get it to work? If Ralph gets it right, you *know* it'd be good enough to fool anybody."

"And if he gets it wrong," James insisted, "we'll be picking bits of leather off the walls for the next hour."

"I'm standing right here, remember?" Ralph said.

James ignored him. "You have to, Zane. You can do it. Just give it a go."

Zane took a deep breath, and then raised his wand again, pointing it at the bag. He looked at the parchment as Ralph held it up. Then, in a low, singsong voice he spoke.

"Light immortal speeds the eye, for understanding's vanity. Discordia, the fool's ally, make expectation's guarantee."

Zane flicked his wand in three small circles, and then tapped the top of the case with it. There was a popping sound and a very faint ring of light appeared, emanating from the wand's tip. The ring grew, slipping down over the case. It grew fainter until it vanished. Zane let out his breath.

"Did it work?" Ralph asked.

"It must have," James said. "It looks the same to us, of course, but something happened, didn't it? The charm must be in place."

"I hope so," Zane said. "Come on, we have to get to the classroom before anybody else gets there."

They ran through the corridor, Zane and James watching for Professor Jackson and Ralph carrying the fake case with his winter coat draped over it.

"This looks stupid," Ralph rasped. "I look about as casual as Grawp in a tutu."

James shushed him. “It doesn’t matter, we’re almost there.”

They stopped outside the door to the Technomancy classroom. Zane peered in, then turned back to James and Ralph.

“Plan B,” he said under his breath. “There’s somebody in there. A Hufflepuff. Can’t remember his name.”

James leaned around the corner of the door. It was a boy he vaguely recognized from Muggle Studies class. His name was Terrence and he glanced up as James was looking.

“Hey, Terrence,” James called, grinning. He sauntered into the room. Behind him, he heard Ralph and Zane whispering. He tried to drown out their voices. “So how was your holiday? Travel much?”

“I guess,” Terrence mumbled.

This is going to be harder than expected, James thought. “So where did you go? I took the train to London. Saw the family and everybody. Had loads of fun. You go anywhere fun?”

Terrence turned in his seat. “Went down to Cork with my mum. It rained most of the trip. Saw a flute concert.”

James nodded encouragingly. Fortunately, Terrence was seated halfway from the front, turned around toward James. Out of the corner of his eye, James saw Zane near Jackson’s desk, positioning the fake case. Terrence started to turn back toward the front of the room.

“A flute concert!” James blurted loudly. “Cool!”

Terrence turned back. “No,” he said, “it wasn’t.”

Zane stood up, giving James the all-clear signal. James saw him and sighed with relief. “Oh. Well, sorry to hear it,” he said, backing away from Terrence. “Anyway. See you around.”

Zane and James took their planned seats in the front row. It was a small classroom and Jackson’s desk was only a couple of feet away. James scanned the front of the room, pleased to see that nothing seemed disturbed. He waited until a few more students came in, laughing and talking, and then whispered to Zane. “Where is it?”

“It’s in that little corner by the chalkboard. I left the cloak folded a little so it doesn’t drape onto the floor. I just hope old Stonewall doesn’t trip over it when he goes behind his desk.”

James looked into the corner that Zane indicated. It was just a shallow alcove formed where the closet next door butted into the room. It was unlikely that Jackson would venture there, but not impossible.

“Sometimes, he doesn’t even go behind his desk all class,” James whispered. Zane gave a little lift and drop of the shoulders, as if to say *here’s hoping*.

A few minutes later, Professor Jackson strode into the room, carrying his ever-present leather bag. James and Zane couldn't help watching intently as he draped his cloak over the desk and settled his briefcase into its accustomed space on the floor next to his desk.

"Greetings, class," Jackson said briskly. "I trust you all had an instructive holiday. One can only hope you haven't forgotten everything we worked so hard to instill in your heads prior to the break. Which reminds me. Please hand your essays to the left and then to the front. Mr. Walker, I will collect them from you once you have them all."

Zane nodded, his eyes bulging a bit. Both James and Zane had their wands slipped up their sleeves. If Jackson noticed, they'd just say they were carrying them that way in honor of their favorite Technomancy teacher, since Jackson himself carried his in a small sheath sewn into his sleeve. Thankfully, Jackson seemed a bit preoccupied.

"I will be grading your essays tonight, as usual. Until then, let us take a sneak peek, as it were, into your cumulative understanding of the subject. Mr. Hollis, please favor us with a short definition of Hechtor's Law of Displaced Inertia, if you please."

Hollis, a red-cheeked first-year Ravenclaw, cleared his throat and began to offer his explanation. James barely heard him. He looked down at Jackson's case, sitting tantalizingly only a few feet away. James thought he could probably kick it if he wished to. His heart pounded and he was filled with a horrible, icy certainty that the plan couldn't possibly work. It had been ridiculously foolhardy to think they could pull such a caper under the prow-nose of Professor Jackson. And yet he knew they had to try. He felt vaguely sick with anxiety. Jackson began to pace.

"Unnecessarily verbose, Mr. Hollis, but relatively accurate. Miss Morganstern, can you elaborate a bit regarding the transference of inertia between objects of different densities?"

"Well, different densities respond to inertia differently, based on the proximity of their atoms," Petra answered. "A ball of lead will be launched in a single direction. A ball of, say, marshmallow will merely explode."

Jackson nodded. "Is there a technomantic workaround for this? Anyone? Miss Goyle?"

Philia Goyle lowered her hand. "A Binding Spell coupled with the Inertia-Transference Spell will keep even low-density substances intact, sir. This has the added benefit that low-density projectiles will travel much farther and faster on a given factor of inertia than a higher-density projectile, such as Miss Morganstern's lead ball."

"True, Miss Goyle, but not necessarily beneficial," Jackson smiled humorlessly. "A feather shot out of a cannon still won't hurt."

The class laughed a little at that. Jackson was just beginning his second circuit of the room. Then, suddenly, Ralph was at the door.

“Excuse be,” he said in a strangely gurgly voice. Everyone in the class turned except James and Ralph. “I’b sorry. I dseem to have a dosebleed.” Ralph’s nose was, indeed, bubbling blood at an alarming rate. He held his finger beneath it, and it was coated and slimy with blood. There was a chorus of *oohs* and *ahhs* from the class, some amused and some disgusted.

Zane wasted no time. As soon as he heard Ralph and saw that Jackson was turned away, heading up the right side of the classroom, he whipped his wand from his sleeve.

“*Wingardium Leviosa!*” he whispered as quietly but as forcefully as he could. The Invisibility Cloak became visible the moment it whipped up, floating off the fake briefcase in the corner. Zane held it there as James fumbled his own wand out. Behind them, they heard Jackson speaking to Ralph.

“Good heavens, boy, hold still.”

“I’b sorry,” Ralph stammered. “I meant to get a cough lozenge and I ate one of thode Weadely Dosebleed Dougats instead. I have to get to the hodpital wing, I think.”

James pointed his wand at the fake briefcase and whispered the Levitation Charm. The case was much heavier than anything James had levitated before, and he wasn’t very good at it under the best of circumstances. The case scuttled on the floor, dragging by a corner. He moved it as close to the real case as possible, knocking the real case aside and partially under the desk. He gasped, and then caught his breath. Behind him, the students were laughing and making disgusted noises.

“Good grief, you don’t need the hospital wing,” Jackson said, becoming annoyed. “Just stand still and move your finger.”

Ralph began to sway on his feet. “I think I’b a hemophebian!” he yelled. That had been Zane’s idea.

“You’re *not* a hemophilic,” Jackson growled. “Now for the last time, hold still!”

James flicked his wand, trying to move the real case around the fake one. It was imperative that he move it into the corner and hide it under the Invisibility Cloak Zane was still levitating. The real case was stuck, however, wedged under a corner of the desk. James concentrated mightily. The briefcase levitated under the desk, pushing the corner of the desk up with it. James grimaced, lowering his wand, and both the case and the desk clunked to the floor. Nobody seemed to notice. Zane was looking at James, wild-eyed. James made a grimace of helplessness. Desperately, Zane made to lower the Invisibility Cloak onto the real case where it was, wedged under the desk. Somehow, however, the cloak had also become snagged, caught on a coat-hook next to the chalkboard. Nothing was going as planned. If anyone turned around now, there would be no hope of covering their tracks. James couldn’t resist glancing around. Ralph’s nose was still pattering blood. Jackson was half squatted in front of him, one hand on Ralph’s arm, trying to pull Ralph’s finger away from his nose, the other holding the hickory wand at the ready. The entire class was watching in various shades of amusement and revulsion.

“Drat it, boy, you’re making a mess. Move your finger, I tell you,” Jackson exclaimed.

James tried to free the real briefcase by working it back and forth with his wand. He was sweating and his wand hand was slick. The case finally came free just as James heard Jackson say “*Artemisae*.”

“Oh!” Ralph said, rather unnecessarily loudly. “There, yes, that’s much better.”

“It’d have been better a minute ago if you’d have listened to me,” Jackson said crossly, poking his wand back into his sleeve. The scene was over. Zane gave a final yank on his wand. The Invisibility Cloak popped loose from the coat-hook and dropped to the floor in a heap, which promptly vanished. James had no time to hide the briefcase. He sensed the class turning back toward the front of the room.

“Please go and wash yourself, young man,” Jackson was saying, his voice becoming louder as he dismissed Ralph and turned toward the front of the room. “You’re an awful sight. People will think you’ve been mauled by a quintaped.” Under his breath, he added, “Nosebleed Nougat...”

Desperately, James stashed his wand back up his sleeve. Zane, in an act of pure split-second inspiration, shot his legs forward from underneath the desk. He grasped the real briefcase between his ankles, then yanked it back beneath his own desk. James heard the scuffling as Zane tried to stuff the case beneath his chair using only his feet. Jackson stopped next to Zane and the room became very quiet.

James tried not to look up. He had the strongest sensation that the professor was looking down at him. Finally, helplessly, he raised his eyes. Jackson was indeed looking down the length of his nose, his gaze moving thoughtfully between Zane and James. James’ stomach plummeted. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Jackson continued to the front of the room.

“Honestly,” he said to the class in general, “the lengths some of you will go to skip a class. It astounds someone even as cynical as myself. At any rate, where were we, then? Ah yes...”

The class wore on. James refused to meet Jackson’s eyes. His only hope was to get out of the classroom as quickly as possible. There was no way to collect either the real briefcase or the Invisibility Cloak while Jackson was still there. Just possibly, however, Jackson wouldn’t see his own case stuffed beneath Zane’s chair. Everything rested, of course, on the effectiveness of Zane’s *Visum-ineptio* charm. James looked down at the false briefcase, sitting on the floor approximately where the real one had been. To his eye, it looked completely fake, its leather a different color and its brass plate reading ‘HIRAM & BLATTWOTT’S LEATHERS, DIAGON ALLEY, LONDON’, instead of ‘T. H. Jackson’. Jackson had obviously sensed something. But if the charm worked, there was still the slightest chance they could pull it off.

Class finally concluded. James jumped up, herding Zane ahead of him. Zane shot him a look of pure consternation, his eyes darting toward the base of his chair, but James pushed him onward, shaking his head minutely. The class pressed toward the door, and James and Zane, having been seated in the front row, were stuck at the rear of the small throng. James was terrified to look back. Finally, the wall of shoulders and backpacks broke apart and James and Zane tumbled into the hallway.

“What’re we going to do?” Zane whispered frantically as they trotted down the corridor.

“We’ll come back later,” James said, struggling to keep his voice low and calm. “Maybe he won’t see anything. He was packing up the essays when we left. If we just hang back here around the corner, we can watch--”

“Mr. Potter?” a voice said imperiously from behind them. “Mr. Walker?”

The two boys stopped in their tracks. They turned very slowly. Professor Jackson was leaning out of the door of the Technomancy classroom. “I believe you two may have left something in my classroom. Would you care to come collect it?”

Neither answered. They walked heavily back the way they had come. Jackson disappeared into the classroom again and was waiting behind the front desk when they got there.

“Come closer, boys,” Jackson said in a breezy voice. “Just right here, in front of the desk, if you please.” Placed on the desk in front of Jackson were both the real and fake briefcases. When James and Zane got to the front of the desk, Jackson spoke again, this time in a low, cold voice.

“I don’t know who’s been telling you stories about what I keep in my attaché, but I can assure the both of you that yours is neither the first nor even the most creative attempt to find out for certain.” James raised his eyebrows in surprise and Jackson nodded at him. “Yes, I have heard the tales that some of my students have invented. Stories of horrible dormant beasts, or doomsday weapons, or keys to alternate dimensions, each more terrible and mind-boggling than the last. Let me assure you, though, my terminally curious, little friends...” Here, Jackson leaned over his desk, bringing his nose less than a foot from the two boys’ faces. He lowered his voice further and spoke very clearly, “That which I keep hidden in my attaché is far, far worse than even your fevered imaginings can contrive. This is not a joke. I am not making idle threats. If you attempt to meddle with my affairs again, you will likely *not live to regret it*. Am I making myself perfectly clear?”

James and Zane nodded, speechless. Jackson continued to stare at them, breathing through his nose in obvious fury. “Fifty points from Gryffindor and fifty points from Ravenclaw. I’d give you both detentions, except that that might lead to questions about this case of mine that I do not wish to answer. Therefore, let me finish by saying, my young friends, that even if you do not so much as look at my attaché ever again, I can still choose to make your lives extremely... *interesting*. Please do bear that in mind. Now,” he stood back, lowering his eyes, “take this pathetic little ruse and be gone.”

With palpable disgust, Jackson shoved his bag at them with the back of his hand. The fake bag remained sitting in front of him. He laced the knucky fingers of his right hand through the ivory handles and hefted it. The brass plate that read ‘HIRAM & BLATTWOTT’S LEATHERS, DIAGON ALLEY, LONDON’ glinted dully as Jackson moved around the desk. Neither James nor Zane could quite bring themselves to touch the case in front of them.

“Well?” Jackson demanded, raising his voice. “Take that thing and be gone!”

“Y-yes, sir,” Zane stammered, grabbing the professor’s bag and pulling it off the desk. He and James turned and fled.

Three corridors later, they stopped running. They stood in the middle of an empty hall and looked at the bag Jackson had insisted they take. There was no question about it. It was the professor’s own black leather briefcase. The name plate shone clearly, ‘T. H. Jackson’. James began to grasp that somehow, amazingly, they had succeeded. They had captured the robe of Merlin.

“It was the *Visum-ineptio* charm,” Zane breathed, glancing up at James. “It had to be. Jackson knew we were up to something, but he didn’t expect that!”

James was completely bewildered. “How, though? He had both bags right in front of him!”

“Well, it’s pretty simple, really. Jackson assumed we were trying to swap the cases, but that we hadn’t gotten around to it yet. He found the case under my chair and believed it was the fake one. The *Visum-ineptio* charm on the fake briefcase worked on *both* briefcases, letting him see what he expected to see. That’s how it preserved the illusion that the fake case was the real one!”

Understanding dawned on James. “The Fool-the-Eye Charm extended to the *real* briefcase, making it look like the fake one, since that’s what Jackson expected! That’s brilliant!” James clapped Zane on the shoulder. “Nice one, you goon! And you doubted yourself!”

Zane looked uncharacteristically humble. He grinned. “Come on, let’s go find Ralph and make sure he’s okay. You really think he needed to eat two of those Nosebleed Nougats?”

“You’re the one that said we needed a diversion.”

James stuffed Jackson’s briefcase under his robe, clutching it under his arm, and the two boys ran to find Ralph, stopping only long enough to collect the Invisibility Cloak from the floor of the empty Technomancy classroom.

Five minutes later, the three boys clambered up to the Gryffindor common room, rushing to hide Jackson’s briefcase before their next class. James buried it in the bottom of his trunk, then Zane produced his wand.

“Just learned this new spell from Gennifer,” he explained. “It’s a special kind of Locking Spell.”

“Wait,” James stopped Zane before he could cast the spell. “How will I get it open again?”

“Oh. Well, I don’t know, to tell you the truth. It’s the counter-spell to *Alohomora*. I wouldn’t think it’d work against the owner of the trunk, though. Just anybody else. Spells are smart that way, aren’t they?”

“Here,” Ralph said, crossing the room. He opened and closed the window, then stood back. “Try it on the window latch. You don’t need that open, anyway. It’s dead cold out there.”

Zane shrugged, and then pointed his wand at the window. “*Colloportus.*” The window lock clacked shut.

“Well, it works, all right,” Ralph observed. “Now try to open it.”

Zane, wand still raised, said, “*Alobomora.*” The lock jiggled once, but remained locked. Zane pocketed his wand. “You try it, James. It’s your window, isn’t it?”

James used the same spell on the window lock. The lock unhinged neatly and the window swung open.

“See?” Zane grinned. “Spells are smart. I bet old Stonewall could tell us how that works, but I’m not going to be asking him any more questions, I’ll tell you that.”

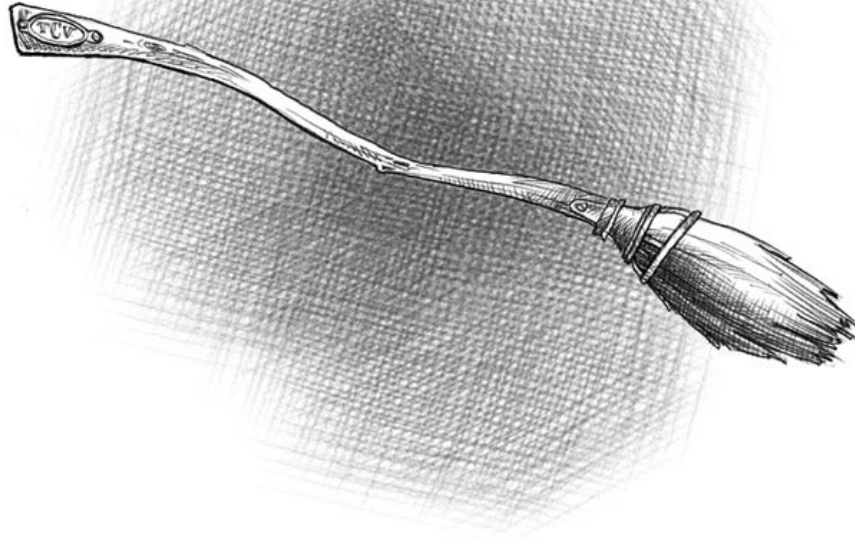
James closed his trunk with Jackson’s case inside and Zane performed the Locking Spell on it.

On the way back down to their classrooms, Ralph asked, “Won’t somebody else notice that Jackson’s carrying a different briefcase? What if one of the other teachers asks him about it?”

“Not going to happen, Ralphinator,” Zane said confidently. “He’s been carrying that thing long enough that everyone expects to see him with it. As long as they *expect* to see his case in his hand, the *Visum-ineptio* charm will make sure that *is* what they see. We’re the only ones that’ll see that it’s your buddy’s old rock-hound bag.”

Ralph still seemed worried. “Will the charm wear off over time? Or will it work as long as people think that the fake case is the real one?”

Neither James nor Zane knew the answer to that. “We just have to hope it lasts long enough,” James said.



13. REVELATION OF THE ROBE

That evening after dinner, the three boys ran up to the Gryffindor sleeping quarters again, pausing only when James noticed the staring woman in the background of a painting of some maidens milking a pair of ridiculously plump cows. He berated the tall and ugly woman, who was dressed like a nun, demanding to know what she was looking at. After half a minute, Zane and Ralph got impatient and each grabbed one of James' elbows, dragging him away. In the sleeping quarters, they clustered around James' trunk while James unlocked it and pulled out Jackson's case. He set it on the edge of his bed and the three of them stared at it.

"Do we have to open it?" Ralph asked.

James nodded. "We have to know we have the robe, don't we? It's been driving me crazy all day. What if I was wrong and the thing in there is just some of Jackson's laundry? I can't help thinking that he's the sort that'd carry around a totally meaningless briefcase just to get people talking about it. You should've seen how he was this morning when he thought he'd caught Zane and me. He was right mad."

Zane plopped onto the bed. "What if we can't even open it?"

"Can't be that much of a lock if it popped open that day in D.A.D.A.," James reasoned.

Ralph stood back, giving James room. "Let's get it over with then. Try and open it."

James approached the case and tried the lock. He'd expected it not to work and was prepared to try the assortment of Opening and Unlocking Spells the three had collected. Instead, the brass catch on top of the case popped open easily. So easily, in fact, that James was momentarily sure it had clicked open a split second before he'd actually touched it. He froze, but neither of the other two boys seemed to have noticed.

"Well?" Ralph whispered. Zane leaned over the case. The mouth of it had come open slightly.

"Can't see anything in there," Zane said. "It's too dark. Open the rotten thing, James. It's yours more than either of ours."

James touched the case, grasped the handles, and used them to pull it open. He could see the folds of black cloth. A vague, musty smell wafted from the open case. James thought it smelled like the inside of a jack-o'-lantern a week after Halloween. He remembered Luna saying that the robe had once been used to cover the body of a dead king and he shuddered.

Zane's voice was low and slightly hoarse. "Is that it? I can't tell what it is."

"Don't," Ralph warned, but James had already reached into the case. He pulled the robe out. The cloth unfolded smoothly, spotlessly black and clean. There seemed to be acres of it. Ralph backed further away as James let the robe pool on the floor at his feet. The last of it came out of the case and James realized he was holding the hood of it. It was a large hood, with golden braids at the throat.

Zane nodded, his face pale and serious. "That's it, no doubt. What are we gonna do with it?"

"Nothing," Ralph answered firmly. "Stick it back in the case, James. That thing's scary. You can feel the magic of it, can't you? I bet Jackson put some kind of Shield Charm or something on the case to contain it. Otherwise, somebody would've felt it. Go on, put it away. I don't want to touch it."

"Hold on," James said vaguely. He could indeed feel the magic of the cloak, just as Ralph had said, but it didn't feel scary. It was powerful, but curious. The smell of the robe had changed as James pulled it out. What had at first smelled faintly rotten now smelled merely earthy, like fallen leaves and wet moss, wild, even exciting. Holding the robe in his hands, James had the most unusual sensation. It was as if he could feel, in the deepest pit of his being, the very air in the room, filling the space like water, streaming through cracks in the frame of the window, cold, like ice-blue vapor. The sensation expanded and he sensed the wind moving around the turret that housed the sleeping quarters. It was alive, swirling over the conical roof, channeling into missing shingles and exposed rafters. James faintly remembered children's stories about how Merlin was a master of nature, how he felt it and used it, and how it obeyed his whims. James knew he was tapping into that power somehow, as if it was embedded in the very fabric of the relic robe. The sensation grew and spiraled. Now James felt the creatures of the deepening evening: the pattering heartbeats of mice in the attics, the blood-purple world of the bats in the forest, the dreaming haze of a hibernating bear, even the dormant life of the trees and grass, their roots like hands clutched in the earth, clinging to life in the dead of winter.

James knew what he was doing, but didn't seem to be operating his own arms. He raised the hood, turning himself into it. The robe slid over his shoulders, and just as the hood settled over his head, hiding his eyes, James heard the alarmed and warning cries of Zane and Ralph. They were fading, as if down a long, sleepy tunnel. They were gone.

He was walking. Leaves crunched under his feet, which were large and shoeless, tough with calluses. He breathed in, filling his lungs, and his chest expanded like a barrel. Big, he was. Tall, with muscled arms that felt like coiled pythons and legs as thick and sturdy as tree trunks. The earth was quiet around him, but alive. He felt it through the soles of his feet when he walked. The vibrancy of the forest streamed into him, strengthening him. But there was less of it than there should be. The world had changed, and was still changing. It was being tamed, losing its feral wildness and strength. Alongside it, his power was dimming as well. He was still unmatched, but there were blind spots in his communion with the earth, and those blind spots were growing, shutting him off bit by bit, reducing him. The realms of men were expanding, scouring the earth, parsing it into meaningless plots and fields, breaking up the magic polarities of the wilderness. It angered him. He had moved among the growing kingdoms of men, advised and assisted them, always for a price, but he hadn't foreseen this result. His magical brothers and sisters were no help. Their magic was different than his. That which made him so powerful, his connection to the earth, was also becoming his only weakness. In a cold rage, he walked. As he passed, the trees spoke to him, but even the woodsy voices of the naiads and the dryads was dimming. Their echo was confused and broken, divided.

Ahead of him, revealed only in the moonlight, a clearing opened, surrounding a stony depression in the earth. He descended into the center of the depression and looked up. The glittering night sky poured into the bowl-shaped clearing, painting everything bone white. His shadow pooled beneath him as if it were noonday. There was no place for him in this world anymore. He would leave the society of men. But he would return when things were different, when circumstances had changed, when the world was again ripe for his power. Then he would reawaken the earth, revive the trees and their spirits, refresh their power, and his with it. Then would be a time of reckoning. It might be decades, or even centuries. It might even be eternity. It didn't matter. He could stay in this time no longer.

There was a noise, a scuffle of clumsy footsteps nearby. Someone else was there, in the clearing with him: someone he hated, but whom he needed. He spoke to this person, and as he did, the world began to dim, to darken, to fade.

“Instruct those that follow. Keep my vestments, station, and talisman at the ready. I will await. At the Hall of Elders' Crossing, when my time of returning is come, assemble them again and I will know. I have chosen you to safeguard this mission, Austramaddux, for as my last apprentice, your soul is in my hand. You are bound to this task until it is complete. Vow to me your oath.”

Out of the descending darkness, the voice spoke only once. “It is my will and my honor, Master.”

There was no answer. He was gone. His robes dropped to the earth, empty. His staff balanced for a moment, then fell forward and was caught in an eerily white hand, the hand of Austramaddux, before it could

hit the rocky ground. Then even that scene vanished. The darkness compressed to a dwindling point. The universe leapt up, monstrous and spinning, and there was only oblivion.

James forced his eyes open and gasped. His lungs felt flattened, as if he hadn't had breath in them for several minutes. Hands grasped him, yanking the hood back and pulling the robe off his shoulders. Weakness stole over James and he began to collapse. Zane and Ralph caught him awkwardly and heaved him onto his bed.

"What happened?" James asked, still dragging in great gulps of air.

"You tell us!" Ralph said, his voice high and frightened.

Zane was stuffing the robe roughly back into the briefcase. "You put this crazy thing on and then pop! Off you went. Not what I'd have called a wise choice, you know."

"I blacked out?" James asked, recovering enough to get his elbows beneath him.

Ralph said, "Blacked out nothing. You up and disappeared. Poof."

"It's true," Zane nodded, seeing James' stunned expression. "You were clean gone for three or four minutes. Then *he* showed up," Zane indicated the corner behind James' bed with a worried nod. James turned and there was the semi-transparent form of Cedric Diggory. The ghost looked down at him, then smiled and shrugged. Cedric seemed rather more solid than the last few times James had seen him.

Zane went on, "He just appeared through the wall, as if he had come looking for you. Ralph here shrieked like--well, I'd say like he'd just seen a ghost, but considering we have breakfast with ghosts most mornings and a History class with one every Tuesday, the phrase doesn't seem all that impressive anymore."

Ralph spoke up. "He took one look at us, then the briefcase, and then he just, sort of, *thinned out*. Next thing we know, you're back, just where'd you been, looking white as a statue."

James turned back to the ghost of Cedric. "What did you do?"

Cedric opened his mouth to speak, tentatively and carefully. As if from a long way off, his voice seeped into the room. James couldn't tell if he was hearing it with his ears or his mind.

You were in danger. I was sent. I saw what was happening when I got here.

"What was it?" James asked. The experience was murky in his memory, but he sensed he'd remember more when the magic of it wore off.

A Threshold Marker. A powerful bit of magic. It opens a dimensional gateway, designed to communicate a message or a secret over great time or distance. But its strength is careless. It almost swallowed you up.

James knew that was true. He had felt it. In the end, the darkness had been consuming, seamless. He swallowed past a hard lump in his throat and asked, "How did I get back?"

I found you, Cedric said simply. I dipped into the ether, where I have spent so much time since my death. You were there, but you were far-off. You were going. I chased you and returned with you.

“Cedric,” James said, feeling stupid for putting on the robe, and terrified at what had almost happened. “Thanks for bringing me back.”

I owed you that. I owed your father that. He brought me back, once.

“Hey,” James said suddenly, brightening. “You can talk now!”

Cedric smiled, and it was the first genuine smile James had seen on the ghostly face. *I feel... different. Stronger. More... here, somehow.*

“Wait,” Ralph said, raising a hand. “This is the ghost you told us about, isn’t it? The one that chased the intruder off the grounds a few months ago?”

“Oh, yeah,” James said. “Zane and Ralph, this is Cedric Diggory. Cedric, these are my friends. So what do you think is happening to you? What’s making you more here?”

Cedric shrugged again. *For what seemed like a long time, I felt like I was in a sort of dream. I moved through the castle, but it was empty. I never got hungry, or thirsty, or cold, or needed to rest. I knew I was dead, but that was all. Everything was dark and silent, and there didn’t seem to be any days or seasons. No passage of time at all. Then things began to happen.*

Cedric turned and sat on the bed, making no mark on the blankets. James, who was closest, could feel a distinct chill emanating from Cedric’s form. The ghost continued.

For periods of time, I started to feel more aware. I began to see people in the halls, but they were like smoke. I couldn’t hear them. I came to realize that these periods of activity happened in the hours of the day right after my time of death. Each night, I’d feel myself awaken. I noticed the time, because that was the thing that meant the most, the sense of minutes and hours passing. I searched out a clock, the one just outside the Great Hall, and watched the time go by. I was most awake throughout the night, but by each morning, I’d begin to fade. Then, one morning, just as I was thinning, losing touch, I saw him.

James sat up straight. “The intruder?”

Cedric nodded. *I knew he wasn’t supposed to be here, and somehow I knew that if I tried, I could make him see me. I scared him away.*

Cedric grinned again, and James thought he could see in that grin the strong and likeable boy that his dad had known.

“But he came back,” James said. Cedric’s grin turned into a scowl of frustration.

He came back, yes. I saw him, and I scared him off again. I started to watch for him in the mornings. And then, one night, he broke in through a window. I was stronger then, but I decided someone else needed to know he was inside the castle. So I came to you, James. You had seen me, and I knew who you were. I knew you'd help.

"That was the night you broke the stained-glass window," Zane said, smiling. "Kicked that guy through it like Bruce Lee. Nice."

"Who was he?" James asked, but Cedric merely shook his head. He didn't know.

"So it's almost seven o'clock, now," Ralph pointed out. "How are you making us see you? Isn't this your weakest time?"

Cedric seemed to think about it. *I'm getting more solid. I'm still just a ghost, but I seem to be becoming, sort of, more of a ghost. I can talk more now. And there is less and less of that strange nothing time. I think that this is just how ghosts are made.*

"But why?" James couldn't help asking. "What makes a ghost happen? Why didn't you just, you know, move on?"

Cedric looked at him closely, and James sensed that Cedric himself didn't know the answer to that question, or at least, not very clearly. He shook his head slightly. *I wasn't done yet. I had so much to live for. It happened so fast, so suddenly. I just... wasn't done.*

Ralph picked up Professor Jackson's case and threw it back into James' trunk. "So where did you go when you popped off, James?" he said, heaving himself onto the end of the bed.

James took a deep breath, collecting his memories of the strange journey. He described the initial feeling of holding the cloak, how it seemed to allow him to sense the air and the wind, then even the animals and the trees. Then he told them about the vision he'd had, of being inside Merlin's body, in his very thoughts. He shuddered, remembering the anger and bitterness, and the voice of the servant, Austramaddux, who vowed his oath to serve until the time of reckoning was come. He recalled it vividly as he spoke, finishing by describing how the blackness of the night had wrapped around him like a cocoon, shrinking and turning to nothingness.

Zane listened with intense interest. "It makes sense," he finally said in a low, awed voice.

"What?" James asked.

"How Merlin might've done it. Don't you see? Professor Jackson himself talked about it on our first day of class!" He was getting excited. His eyes were wide, darting from James to Ralph to the ghost of Cedric, who was still seated on the edge of the bed.

Ralph shook his head. "I don't get it. I don't have Technomancy this year."

“Merlin didn’t die,” Zane said emphatically. “He Disapparated!”

James was puzzled. “That doesn’t make sense. Any wizard can Apparate. What’s so special about that?”

“Remember what Jackson told us that first day? Apparition is instantaneous for the wizard whose doing it, even though it takes a little time for the wizard’s bits to fly apart then reassemble at a new place. If a wizard Disapparates without determining his new center-point, he never Reapparates at all, right? He just stays stuck in nothingness forever!”

“Well, sure,” James agreed, remembering the lecture, but failing to see the point.

Zane was nearly vibrating with excitement. “Merlin didn’t Disapparate to a *place*,” he said meaningfully. “He Disapparated to a *time* and a *set of circumstances*!”

Ralph and James boggled, considering the implications. Zane went on. “At the end of your vision, you said Merlin told Austramaddux to keep the relics and to watch for the time to be right. Then when the time came, the relics were supposed to be gathered again at the Hall of Elder’s Crossing. You see? Merlin was setting up the time and circumstances for his Reapparition. What you described at the very end, James, was Merlin Disapparating into oblivion,” Zane paused, thinking hard. “All these centuries, he’s just been suspended in time, stuck in everywhere, waiting for the right circumstances for his Reapparition. To him, no time has passed at all!”

Ralph looked at the trunk at the end of James’ bed. “Then it’s for real,” he said. “They could actually do it. They could bring him back.”

“Not anymore,” James said, smiling mirthlessly. “We’ve got the robe. Without all the relics, the circumstances won’t be right. They can’t do anything.”

As soon as James had heard Zane explain it, it made perfect sense, especially in the context of the Threshold Marker vision. Suddenly, his possession of the robe had become even more important, and he couldn’t help wondering at the remarkable series of lucky circumstances that’d led to them obtaining it. From the briefcase Ralph had discovered in just the nick of time to Zane’s remarkably effective *Visum-ineptio* charm, James had the strongest sense that he, Zane, and Ralph were being guided in their goal of thwarting the Merlin plot. But who was helping them?

“By the way,” James said to the ghost of Cedric, once Ralph and Zane had fallen into an animated discussion about Merlin’s Disapparition. “You said you were sent to help me. Who sent you?”

Cedric had stood and was fading a bit, but not much. He smiled at James and said, *Someone I’m not supposed to mention, although I think you can probably guess. Someone who’s been watching.*

Snape, thought James. The portrait of Snape had sent Cedric to help him when he’d gotten sucked into the Threshold Marker. But how had he known? James thought about that for a long time after Zane

and Ralph had headed back to their own rooms, long after the rest of the Gryffindors had climbed the stairs and plopped into their beds. No answer came that night, however, and eventually James slept.



For the next several days, the three boys went about their normal school activities in a sort of triumphant fog. James left Jackson's bag, with the relic robe inside, locked in his trunk and protected with Zane's Locking Spell. Considering the effectiveness of the *Visum-ineptio* charm on the fake case, they had no serious concerns that anyone would even be looking for the real briefcase. Jackson continued to carry the old red rock-hound bag with the Hiram & Blattwott's label on it to classes and meals, with no indication that he thought anything was out of the ordinary. Further, no one else spared it a second glance, even though Jackson had been seen carrying the black case with his name plate on the side for months. Finally, on Saturday afternoon, James, Ralph, and Zane met in the Gryffindor common room to discuss their next steps.

"There're really only two questions, now," Zane said, leaning over the table upon which they were ostensibly doing their homework. "Where is the Hall of Elder's Crossing? And where is the third relic, Merlin's staff?"

James nodded. "I've been thinking about that last one. The throne is under the guard of Madame Delacroix. The robe was under the guard of Professor Jackson. The third relic must be under the guard of the third conspirator. My guess is it's somebody else here on the grounds, an inside person. What if it's the Slytherin who used the name Austramaddux on Ralph's GameDeck? They'd have to be aware of the plot if they used that name, and if they are aware of it, they're in on it."

"But who?" Ralph asked. "I didn't see who took it. It was just gone. Besides, the staff of Merlin would be pretty hard to hide, wouldn't it? If he was as big as you said he was in your vision, James, then the thing must be six feet tall if it's an inch. How do you hide a six-foot magical lightning rod like that?"

James shook his head. "I haven't the foggiest. Still, it's up to you to keep a look out, Ralph. Like Ted said, you're our inside man."

Ralph slumped. Zane doodled on a piece of parchment. "So what about question one?" he said without looking up. "Where is the Hall of Elder's Crossing?"

James and Ralph exchanged blank looks. James said, “No clue, again. But I think there’s a third question we need to think about, too.”

“As if the first two weren’t tricky enough,” Ralph muttered.

Zane glanced up and James saw he was doodling the gate to the Grotto Keep. “What’s the third question?”

“Why haven’t they done it yet?” James whispered. “If they believe they have all three relics, why haven’t they just gone on down to wherever this Hall of Elder’s Crossing is and tried to call Merlin back from his thousand-year Disapparition?”

None of them had any answers, but they agreed it was an important question. Zane flipped his doodle over, revealing a drabble of scribbled notes and diagrams from Arithmancy class. “I’m checking the Ravenclaw library, but between homework, classes, Quidditch, debate and Constellations Club, I hardly have two minutes left to rub together.”

Ralph dropped his quill on the table and leaned back, stretching. “How’s that coming, anyway? You’re the only one with any contact with Madame Delacroix. What’s she like?”

“Like a gypsy mummy with a pulse,” Zane replied. “She and Trelawney are supposed to be sharing Constellations Club, like Divination class, but they’ve started trading on and off instead of teaching it together. Works a lot better, since they sort of cancel each other out, anyway. Trelawney just has us sketch astrological symbols and look at the planets through the telescope to ‘ascertain the moods and manners of the planetary brethren.’” James, who knew Sybil Trelawney as a distant family friend, grinned at Zane’s affectionate impression of her. Zane went on, “Delacroix, though, she has us plotting star charts and measuring the color of starlight wavelengths, working out the exact timing of some big astronomical event.”

“Oh, yeah,” James remembered. “The alignment of the planets. Petra and Ted told me about that. They’re in Divination with her. Seems like the voodoo queen’s really into that kind of stuff.”

“She’s the anti-Trelawney, that’s for sure. With her, it’s all math and calculations. We know the date it’ll happen, but she wants us to factor out the exact timing right down to the minute. Pure busywork if you ask me. She’s a little kooky about it.”

“She’s kooky in general, if you ask me,” Ralph stated.

“I think she might be onto us,” James said in a hushed voice. “I’ve seen her looking at me sometimes.”

Zane raised his eyebrows and pointed at his eyes. “She’s blind, if you remember. She’s not looking at anything, mate.”

“I know,” James said, undeterred. “But I swear that she knows something. I think she has ways of seeing that don’t have anything to do with her eyes.”

“Let’s not freak ourselves out,” Ralph said quickly. “This is freaky enough already. She can’t know anything. If she did, she’d act on it, right? So forget about her.”

The next day, James and Ralph went to visit Hagrid in his cabin, ostensibly to inquire after Grawp and Prechka. Hagrid was rebuilding the wagon Prechka had accidentally destroyed and was glad of the break. He invited them in and served them tea and biscuits while he warmed himself by the fire, Trife lying over his feet and occasionally licking Hagrid’s lowered hand.

“Oh, it’s all ups and downs for them,” Hagrid said, as if the tumults of giant courtship were a quaint mystery. “They fought fer a while over the holiday. Lovers’ spat over an elk carcass. Grawpy wanted the head, but Prechka wanted to make the antlers into a bit o’ jewelry.”

Ralph took a break from blowing steam off his tea. “She wanted to make jewelry out of elk antlers?”

“Well, I say jewelry,” Hagrid said, raising his huge palms. “It’s a tricky concept. Giants use the same sound fer jewelry an’ weapons. Comes to the same thing when yeh’re twenty feet tall, I s’pose. Anyway, they worked that all out and now they’re happy as can be again.”

James asked, “Is she still living up in the foothills, Hagrid?”

“Sure she is,” Hagrid said, a little reproachfully. “She’s an hon’rable girl, is Prechka. And Grawp, why, he bides his time in his hovel most days. Got ‘imself a right nice firepit and a lean-to of birches. These things take time. Giant love is... well, it’s a delicate thing, don’cher know.”

Ralph coughed a little on his tea.

“Hey, Hagrid,” James said, changing the topic. “You’ve been around Hogwarts for a long time. You probably know lots of secret stuff about the school and the castle, don’t you?”

Hagrid settled into his chair. “Well, sure. Nobody knows the grounds s’well as myself. Except maybe Argus Filch. I started out as a student, I did, a-ways back before even yer dad was born.”

James knew he had to be very careful. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Tell me, Hagrid, if somebody had something really magical they wanted to hide in the castle somewhere...”

Hagrid stopped petting Trife. He turned his great shaggy head toward James slowly. “And what would a first-year pup like yerself be needin’ to hide, might I ask?”

“Oh, not me, Hagrid,” James said quickly. “Somebody else. I’m just curious.”

Hagrid’s beetle black eyes twinkled. “I see. And this somebody else, I’m wond’rin’ what they might be up to, then, hidin’ secret magical items here and there...”

Ralph took a large, deliberate sip of the his tea. James looked out the window, avoiding Hagrid's suddenly penetrating gaze. "Oh, you know, nothing particular. I was just wondering..."

"Ah," Hagrid said, smiling slightly and nodding. "Yeh've been told a lot of stories about old Hagrid from yer dad and Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron, I'm guessing. Hagrid used to let slip some details that maybe he was supposed to keep secret. S'true, too. I can be a bit thick sometimes, forgettin' what I should and shouldn't be saying. Yeh may recall stories about a certain dog named Fluffy, among others, yes?" Hagrid studied James intently for a few moments, and then heaved a great sigh. "James, m'boy, I'm a good bit older than I was then. Old Keepers of the Keys don't learn much, but we do learn. Besides, yer dad clued me in that you might be getting up to dickens and asked me to keep an eye out for yeh. Soon as he noticed yeh'd, er, *borrowed* his Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map, that was."

"What?" James blurted, turning so quickly he almost knocked over his tea.

Hagrid's bushy eyebrows rose. "Oh. Well, there yeh go, then. I don't s'pose I was meant to tell you that." He frowned thoughtfully, then seemed to dismiss it. "Ah, well, he didn't actually tell me *not* to mention it."

James sputtered, "He knows? Already?"

"James," Hagrid laughed, "yer dad's the Head of the Auror Department, in case yeh forgot. Talked to him about it last week right in me own fire, here. What he's most curious about is whether or not yeh've gotten the map to work yet, since so much of the castle's been rebuilt. He forgot to test it when he was here. So, had any luck, then?"

In the adventure of capturing the Merlin robe, James had completely forgotten about the Marauder's Map. Sulkily, he told Hagrid that he hadn't tried it yet.

"Prob'ly for the best, yeh know," Hagrid replied. "Just 'cause yer dad knows yeh nicked it, doesn't mean he's happy about it. And so far as I was able to gather, yer mum doesn't know about it at all, yet. If yeh're lucky, she won't, neither, although I can't imagine yer dad keepin' that kind of secret from her fer long. Best just to keep yer contraband packed away rather than hidin' it anywhere on the grounds. Trust me, James. Keepin' suspicious magical items around the school can cause a lot more trouble than it's worth."

On the way back to the castle, bundled against the windy cold, Ralph asked James, "What's he mean about getting the map to work? What's it do?"

James explained the Marauder's Map to Ralph, feeling vaguely worried and annoyed that his dad already knew about his taking it and the Invisibility Cloak. He'd known he'd get caught eventually, but had assumed he'd get a howler about it rather than a ribbing from Hagrid.

Ralph was interested in the map. "It really shows everybody who's in the castle and where they are? That'd be seriously useful! So how does it work?"

“You have to say a special phrase. Dad told me a long time ago, but I can’t remember it off the top of my head. We’ll give it a try some night. Right now, I don’t want to think about it.”

Ralph nodded and let the subject drop. They entered the castle through the main portico and parted at the stairs leading to the cellars and the Slytherin quarters.

It was getting late and James found himself alone in the corridors. The wintry night was cloudy and starless. It pressed against the windows and sucked at the light of the hall torches. James shivered, partly at the cold and partly at a sense of icy dread that seemed to be seeping into the corridor, filling it like a heavy fog from the floor up. He walked faster, wondering how it could be that the halls were so dark and empty. It wasn’t particularly late, and yet the air had a sense of chilly stillness that felt like the dead of morning or the air of a sealed crypt. He realized he’d been walking rather farther than the corridor should have allowed. Surely he should have come to the intersection with the statue of the one-eyed witch by now, where he’d turn left into the reception hall, leading to the staircases. James stopped and glanced back the way he had come. The hall looked the same, and yet *wrong* somehow. It looked far too long. The shadows of it seemed to be in the wrong places, teasing his eye somehow. And then he noticed there were no torches on the walls. The light hung empty, ghostly, bleeding its color from flickering yellow to shimmery silver, fading even as he watched.

Fear leaped onto James’ back, icy cold and undeniable. He spun back to the front, meaning to run, but his feet failed him when he saw what was ahead. The corridor was still there, but the pillars had become the trunks of trees. The ribs of the vaulted ceilings had turned to limbs and vines, with nothing beyond but the vast face of the night sky. Even the pattern of the tiled floor melted into a lacework of roots and dead leaves. And then, even as James watched, the illusion of the school corridor evaporated completely, leaving only forest. Cold wind barreled past him, whipping his cloak and threading the hair back from his temples with ghostly fingers. James recognized where he was, even though the last time he’d been here, the leaves had still been on the trees and the crickets had been singing their chorus. This was the wood bordering the lake, near the island of the Grotto Keep. The trees groaned, rubbing their bare branches together in the wind, and the sound was like low voices moaning in sleep, wrapped in fever dreams. James realized he was walking again, moving toward the edge of the trees, where the reeds swished and bobbed at the edge of the lake. A great, dark mass rose beyond, blotting out the view. As James approached, apparently helpless to stop his plodding feet, the moon unveiled from a bank of dense clouds. The island of the Grotto Keep revealed itself in the moonglow, and James’ breath caught in his chest. The island had grown. The impression of a secret fortress was stronger than ever. It was a gothic monstrosity, decked with grim statues and leering gargoyles, all somehow grown from the vines and trees of the island. The dragon’s maw of the bridge lay before him, and James forced himself to stop there, without setting a foot onto it. He remembered the gnashing wooden teeth as it had tried to devour him and Zane. In the silvery moonlight, the gates at the other end of the bridge were quite visible, as well as the words of the poem. *When by the light of Sulva bright I found the Grotto Keep.* The gates suddenly shuddered and flung open, revealing blackness like a throat. A voice came out of that blackness, clear and beautiful, pure as a chiming bell.

“Keeper of the relic,” said the voice. “Your duty is satisfied.”

As James stood and watched, looking across the bridge into the darkness of the open doorway, a light formed there. It condensed, solidified, and assumed a shape. It was, James recognized, the gently glowing shape of a dryad, a woman of the wood, a tree sprite. It wasn't the same one he had met before, however. That one had glowed with a green light. This one's light was pale blue. She pulsed slightly. Her hair flowed around her head as if in a current of water. A quiet, almost loving smile was on her lips and her huge, liquid eyes twinkled gently.

“You have performed your role,” the dryad said, her voice as dreamy and hypnotic as the other dryad's had been, if not more so. “You need not guard the relic. This is not your burden. Bring it to us. We are its guardians. Ours is the task, granted from the beginning. Relieve yourself of its weight. Bring us the relic.”

James looked down and saw that, without realizing it, he had taken a step onto the bridge. The dragon's maw hadn't closed on him. He glanced up and saw that it had actually pulled upwards a bit, welcoming him. The junction of the fallen trees which formed the jaw creaked slightly.

“Bring us the relic,” the dryad said again, and she lifted her arms toward James as if she meant to welcome him with an embrace. Her arms were unnaturally long, almost as if they stretched out to him over the bridge. Her fingernails were a blue so deep, it was nearly purple. They were long and surprisingly ragged. James retreated a step, backing off the bridge. The dryad's eyes changed. They brightened and hardened.

“Bring us the relic,” she said once more, and her voice changed as well. The song had leaked out of it. “It isn't yours. Its power is greater than you, greater than all of you. Bring it to us before it unmakes you. The relic destroys those whom it does not need, and it no longer needs you. Bring it to us before it decides to use someone else. Bring us the relic while you still can.”

Her long arms reached across the bridge and James felt sure he could touch them if he reached out. He backed away further, hooking his heel on a root and stumbling. He turned, pinwheeling his arms for a handhold, and fell against something broad and hard. He pressed his hands against it and pushed backwards, righting himself. It was the stone of a wall. Five feet away, a torch crackled in its sconce. James glanced around. The corridor of Hogwarts stretched away, warm and mundane, as if he'd never left. Perhaps he never had. He looked the other direction. There was the intersection with the statue of the one-eyed witch. The sense of dread was gone, and yet James felt certain that what had happened hadn't just been a vision of some kind. He could still feel the chill of the night wind in the folds of his cloak. When he looked down, there was a crumble of dry river mud on the end of his shoe. He shivered, then gathered himself and ran the rest of the way to the stairs, where he took two at a time climbing to the common room.

The only thing James was sure of was that something wanted him to give up the Merlin robe. He just wasn't sure it was the *right* something. Fortunately, the robe was still locked away in Jackson's bag in James' trunk. After his experience with touching the robe, James had no plans to take the robe out of the trunk again until he handed it over to his dad and the Auror Department when the time was right. The time

wasn't right yet, but it would be. Soon. Either way, he wasn't about to hand it over to some mysterious entity, tree sprite or not. Confident of this, James reached the Gryffindor common room and prepared for bed. Still, long after he had settled under his blankets, he thought he could hear the whispering voice in the wind beyond the window, pleading with him endlessly, monotonously: *Bring us the relic... Bring us the relic while you still can...* It chilled him, and when he did sleep, he dreamed of those haunting, beautiful eyes and those long, long arms with the thin hands and ragged, purple fingernails.



The following Friday, in Herbology class, James was amused to see that Neville Longbottom had moved Ralph's transfigured peach tree out of the Transfiguration classroom, where it had become rather cumbersome, and into one of the greenhouses.

"All this from a banana." Neville confirmed to James after class.

"Yeah. I bet Ralph was more surprised than anybody. He's amazing, but I don't think he knows his own power, really. Some of the other Slytherins think he's got some powerful old magical family in his bloodline. Could be, I suppose, since he never knew his mum."

"That's the sort of thing they'd think," Neville said with unusual candor. "Muggle-borns can be just as powerful as anyone born of an old pureblood family. Some prejudices never change, though."

James looked up at the peach tree, which had become rather large despite the fact that its roots were still twined hopelessly around one of the Transfiguration room tables. He knew Neville was right, but he couldn't help thinking about the look on Ralph's face the day he'd transfigured the banana. Ralph had never said so, but James had a sense that Ralph's power frightened him just a little.

The next day, the Gryffindor Quidditch team was slated in a match against the Slytherins. James sat in the Gryffindor stands with Zane and Sabrina Hildegard. Ralph, for purposes of maintaining his few Slytherin friends, sat in the green-decked grandstand across the pitch. James made eye contact with Ralph once and waved. Ralph waved back, but carefully, being sure not to be seen by his older housemates.

Below, on the field, the team captains strode out to the centerline to meet with Cabe Ridcully for the declaration of rules and a handshake, a tradition that nobody really paid any attention to anymore. James watched Justin Kennely shake Tabitha Corsica's hand perfunctorily. Even from his vantage point high in the

grandstand, James could see the smarmy, polite smile on Tabitha's admittedly beautiful face. Then both turned and walked in opposite directions back to their holding pens beneath the stands, leaving Ridcully alone with the Quidditch trunk.

Zane happily munched a bag of popcorn he'd brought with him, having somehow convinced one of the kitchen house-elves to prepare it. "This should be an excellent match," he observed, taking in the high-spirited crowd.

"Gryffindor against Slytherin is always a crowd-stopper," Sabrina said, raising her voice over the noise. "Back in my mum's day, everybody hated Slytherin because they were dirty players. A guy named Miles Bletchley was the team captain back then, and he went on to play for the Thundelarra Thunderers for a couple of years until he was booted from the league for using a corked broom."

"A what?" Zane interjected. "How do you cork a broom?"

James explained, "It's a kind of cheating where a hole is drilled down the center of the broom and something magical is threaded into it, like a dragon's rib or a basilisk fang. Basically turns the whole broom into a magic wand. He was using it to cast Repelling Spells and modified *Expelliarmus* spells, making the opposing team fumble the Quaffle. Really crooked old bugger, he was."

As he spoke, the Slytherin team streaked out from their holding pen to the sound of cheers from their grandstand. Damien, seated in the broadcast booth with his wand to his throat, announced the team, his voice echoing in the crisp January air.

"So," Zane called over the cheers, "doesn't seem like everybody hates the Slytherins anymore."

Sure enough, there was scattered applause throughout the rest of the grandstands. Only the Gryffindor stands booed and hissed. James shrugged. "They don't seem to play as dirty as they used to. But they still field unusually strong teams. There's something dodgy about them, it's just not as obvious as it used to be."

"I'll say," Zane agreed. "When we played Slytherin before the break, it was as clean a match as I've played all year. Ridcully barely called a single foul on 'em. Still, there was something just a little *too slick* about them. They're either the luckiest bunch of skunks ever to mount brooms or they've made a deal with the devil himself."

James gritted his teeth.

Across the pitch, Horace Slughorn, red-cheeked and bundled in a fur-collared coat and matching hat, waved a small Slytherin flag on a stick and yelled encouragements to his House team. Ralph, seated two rows below him, applauded dutifully. James knew that Ralph wasn't much of a Quidditch fan, despite the almost studious attention he paid to the matches, and James guessed that it was because Ralph couldn't really choose a team to be loyal to. His friends, including Rufus Burton, cheered and hooted wildly.

The Gryffindor team took to the pitch next, streaming from the holding pen beneath their grandstand, and the spectators around James erupted, leaping to their feet as one. James shouted right alongside them, grinning and ecstatic, certain that the Gryffindors would win. He stomped his feet and yelled himself hoarse as the team circled the pitch, waving and grinning.

The teams flew into position. After instructing the teams to play a clean match and assuring everyone was in position, Ridcully released the Bludgers and Snitch and tossed the Quaffle into the air. The players collapsed into a swarm, chasing the Bludgers and wrestling over the Quaffle. Noah and Tom Squallus, the two Seekers, streaked off after the Snitch, which darted around the Ravenclaw banners and vanished.

Almost immediately, the difference between the teams became apparent. Gryffindor fought a textbook match, based entirely on carefully practiced drills. Justin Kennely could be heard shouting plays and formations over the cheering crowd, pointing and giving signs. The Slytherins, on the other hand, seemed to have a graceful, almost eerie playing style that moved them over the pitch like a school of fish. Tabitha Corsica called no directions from her broom, and yet her players peeled off and regrouped with dancelike precision. Once, while in possession, Tabitha ducked under a Bludger and simultaneously tossed the Quaffle over her shoulder. The ball arced through the air and was deftly caught by a teammate who had flown a perpendicular course directly underneath her. The teammate underhanded the Quaffle through the center goal before the Gryffindor Keeper even realized Tabitha didn't have it anymore. James groaned while the Slytherins stood and cheered. Justin Kennely looked as if he wanted to jump up and down on his broom in frustration. Still, an hour into the match, the score was one hundred and thirty to one hundred and forty in favor of Gryffindor, close enough that the lead had changed five times.

"It's all about the Seekers in a match like this," Sabrina yelled exuberantly, not taking her eyes from the players. "And Squallus is new to that position since Gnofftton finished last year. Noah should be able to nail him to the wall with his own broom."

Sure enough, a sudden roar went up from the crowd and James saw that Noah was in pursuit of the Snitch. Across the pitch, Tom Squallus was bent over his broom, baring his teeth into the cold wind and rushing to cut Noah off. He banked through the throng of players, barely missed by Justin Kennely's swatted Bludger. Despite his speed, James was confident there was no way Squallus would beat Noah to the prize. A golden streak and a whir of tiny wings buzzed by the Gryffindor grandstand, followed a split second later by Noah. Those in the front rows ducked, then leapt to their feet cheering as Noah banked hard, barely missing the grandstand and lunging forward on his broom, arm outstretched. There was a long, breathless moment when Noah appeared to be in the tow of the tiny golden ball, the distance shrinking, shrinking, Noah's hand trembling as he reached. Then, in a flurry of cloaks and brooms, something changed. Noah was forced to yank up on his broom, grinding to a slewing stop that destroyed his control. A cloud of Slytherins, led by Tabitha Corsica, had swept in front of him from all directions, stitching a virtual wall in midair. Noah ran into a burly Slytherin and bounced off, losing his grip on his broom. He tumbled sideways, grabbing on with one hand and swinging beneath it. The crowd roared.

Tabitha Corsica shot through the wall of Slytherins, which opened for her like an iris. Her cloak whipped behind her and James was amazed to see the Snitch flying *behind* her, in the shadow of her cloak. It dipped upwards and Tabitha followed almost instantaneously, bent low over her broom. Somehow, without even looking, she was shadowing the Snitch, marking it for Tom Squallus. He saw her, banked hard, and swooped past her. When he came out on the other side, his hand was raised and the Snitch glittered within it. The Slytherin grandstands cheered uproariously. The game was over.

Noah swung himself from beneath his broom, hooking one foot over it. He struggled upright just as Ted and Justin Kennely swooped in next to him, talking and gesturing. James understood the nature of what they were saying even if he couldn't hear the words through the cheers and boos. Something extremely odd had happened, and yet the Slytherins hadn't actually committed any fouls. On the grass of the pitch, Petra Morganstern, who played Chaser, had cornered Cabe Ridcully and was animatedly pointing at Tabitha Corsica, who was still on her broom, being congratulated by her teammates alongside Tom Squallus. Ridcully shook his head, unable or unwilling to agree with Petra's allegations. There didn't seem to be any recourse for the Gryffindors, since they couldn't prove that anything illegal had actually occurred.

"What in the name of Voldy's pasty-white rear end was *that*?" Damien Damascus demanded, having quit the broadcast booth and joined James, Zane, and Sabrina.

Sabrina shook her head. "That was right creepy. Did you see what I saw? Corsica blocked the Snitch! She never touched it, but she flew right next to it, marking it until Squallus could get his broom in gear."

"There's no rule against that?" Zane asked as they all joined the throng leaving the stands.

"No point making rules against things that are impossible," Damien said crossly. "As long as she didn't touch it, she's in the clear. She wasn't even *watching* the Snitch. I'd swear it."

Ralph was trotting across the pitch when James and Zane tromped down the last few steps. Panting, he angled them away from Sabrina and Damien, whose moods were getting fouler.

"Did you see that?" Ralph asked, struggling to catch his breath. He seemed extremely agitated.

"We saw *something*," James said, "although I'm not sure I believe my eyes."

Zane was less diplomatic. "The Gryffindors think your buddies cheated somehow. It's going to throw off the final standings, too. Now it looks like Ravenclaw will be playing Slytherin for the tournament. I was hoping for a Gryffindor and Ravenclaw match."

"Will you two forget about the bloody Quidditch tournament for a minute?" Ralph said, turning to face the two of them at the base of the grandstands. "In case you've forgotten, we have more important things to think about."

"All right, then spill it, Ralph," James said, trying not to be annoyed.

Ralph took a deep breath. “You told me I was your man on the inside, didn’t you? So I’ve been watching closely, looking for hints and clues about who might be involved with the whole Merlin plot, right?”

“And you think now is the time to discuss this?” Zane asked, raising his eyebrows.

“No, no, it’s fine,” James interjected. “What’d you see, Ralph? Something going on back at Slytherin Central?”

“No!” Ralph said impatiently. “Not back at the common room or anything. Right here, just a few minutes ago! Remember what we’re supposed to be looking for?”

“Yeah,” Zane said, becoming interested, “the Merlin staff.”

Ralph nodded meaningfully. There was a cheer nearby. The three boys turned as the Slytherins left the pitch, surrounded by a crowd of students in green scarves. Tabitha walked at the head of the group, her broom held triumphantly over her shoulder.

“Six feet or so of unusually magical wood,” Ralph said in a low voice, still watching Tabitha leave the pitch. “Origins unknown.”

“That’s right!” James replied, understanding dawning on him. “Tabitha said her broom was a custom design, crafted by some Muggle artist or something! She registered it as a Muggle artifact, since it wasn’t a standard model!”

“And there’s no question that there’s something pretty *unusually* magical about it,” Ralph added. James nodded.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Zane asked incredulously.

Ralph glanced back at him. “Makes sense, doesn’t it? It’s the perfect hiding place! That’s why I came running over here right after the match. I wanted you both to see it, too, and see if it fits.”

Zane whistled in awe. “Talk about your corked brooms! Here, all this time Corsica’s been flying around on Merlin’s flippin’ staff!”

James couldn’t take his eyes off it as Tabitha crested the hill heading back to the castle. The wintry sunlight glinted off the bristly tail of the broom. It was indeed the perfect disguise for a six-foot length of highly magical wood. And now they knew for sure who was the third co-conspirator in the Merlin plot, the Slytherin who went by the profile name of Austramaddux. James’ heart pounded with excitement and anticipation.

“So,” he said as the three of them began to follow the Slytherins at a careful distance, wending their way back to the castle, “how are we going to get the Merlin staff away from Tabitha Corsica?”



14. THE HALL OF ELDERS' CROSSING

“What? Why do we need to steal her broom, anyway?” Ralph exclaimed at breakfast the next morning. He leaned over the table, reaching for a plate of sausages. “It would be *loads* harder to steal than Jackson’s case was. Boys aren’t even *allowed* in the girls’ dorms. We’d never get near it! Besides, we’ve got the robe already. They can’t do anything without all the relics.”

“It’s the Merlin staff, that’s why we have to get it,” James replied. “Even on its own, it’s got to be one of the most powerful magical objects in the world. You saw what Tabitha Corsica did with it at the match. And it wasn’t just her shadowing the Snitch without even looking. Her whole team seemed to respond to it somehow, or at least their brooms did. They knew just where to be at all the right moments. That’s some really powerful magic. So far, she’s only using the staff to win Quidditch matches, but do you really want something like that in the hands of someone like her and the Progressive Element?”

Ralph looked dour. Zane put his coffee cup down and stared at the tabletop. "I don't know..." he said.

"What?" James said impatiently.

Zane glanced up. "Well, it just seems too easy, really. I mean, first there was Ralph's buddy's rock-hound bag that showed up at just the right time. Then, no matter how you look at it, we got really lucky with that *Visum-ineptio* charm. Even before that, look at all the coincidences that led to you discovering the hiding place of the Merlin throne, from catching a glimpse of the voodoo queen on the lake that night to finding that *Daily Prophet* article about the break-in at the Ministry. And now, we just happen to figure out that Tabitha's broom is the Merlin staff. I hate to say it, but it can't be much of a dark conspiracy if a trio of first-year shlubs like us have worked it all out."

James fumed. "All right, yeah, so we've gotten lucky here and there. We've worked really hard and been extremely careful, too. And besides, it all fits, doesn't it? Just because the people behind the Merlin plot have been too arrogant to think anybody could catch them, doesn't mean the plot isn't for real. What about what happened when we opened Jackson's case? And I didn't even tell you what happened to me last week!"

Ralph jumped, almost knocking over his pumpkin juice. His eyes were wild for a second, and then he calmed himself. "Last week? When?"

"The night we went to see Hagrid, right after I left you," James answered. He described the way the halls of Hogwarts had transformed into forest around him, his strange journey to the island of the Grotto Keep, and the mysterious ghostly figure that had instructed him to bring her the relic robe. Zane listened with keen interest, but Ralph's face was pale and blank.

When James finished, Zane asked, "You think it really was a dryad?"

James shrugged. "I don't know. It sure looked a lot like the one we saw in the forest, but different, too. It *pulsed*, if you know what I mean. I could feel it in my head."

"Maybe it was a dream," Zane said carefully. "It sure sounds like one."

"It wasn't a dream. I was in the corridor heading to the common room. I wasn't sleepwalking."

"I'm just saying," Zane said blandly, lowering his eyes.

"What?" James prodded. "You think that whole Merlin thing was a dream, too? When I disappeared from the room right in front of the both of you, and Cedric Diggory's ghost had to bring me back?"

"Of course not. Still, it just sounds kind of crazy. Were you in the forest or were you in the corridor? Which one was real? Were either of them real? I mean, you've been thinking about all of this an awful lot. Maybe..."

Ralph was studying his empty plate. He spoke without raising his head. "It wasn't a dream."

James and Zane both looked at Ralph. "How do you know, Ralph?" Zane asked.

Ralph sighed. "Because the same thing happened to me."

James' eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "You saw the Grotto Keep? And the dryad, too? Ralph, why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't know what they were!" Ralph said, looking up. "I wasn't with you two when you went out in the forest and saw the island and met the dryad, remember? So last week, I was on my way through the cellars to the Slytherin rooms and all of a sudden, the cellars just faded out and turned into a forest, same as you described, James. I saw the island and the tree sprite lady, but I didn't recognize them. I thought she was a ghost or something. She told me to bring the relic to her, but I was scared. I'm not used to having weird, magical, out-of-body experiences or anything. I tried to run away, but then, all of a sudden I was standing outside the door to the Slytherin common room, plain as could be. I was worried about my sanity, to tell the truth. I thought all this magical stuff was making me soft in the head. Frankly, I'm a little relieved that the same thing happened to you, too."

"I can see why," Zane said, nodding.

"But why you?" James asked. "You don't have the relic. I do."

Zane tilted his head and cinched a corner of his mouth up in that expression of comical concentration he put on when he was thinking hard. "Maybe it's as simple as the fact that Ralph's a Slytherin. I mean, he *was* in the debate against Petra and me. Maybe whatever it was thinks Ralph is the weakest link. Maybe it thinks it can get Ralph to betray you and steal the robe and then bring it to the island. Not that you would, Ralph," Zane added, looking at Ralph.

"No way. I'm never touching that thing," Ralph concurred.

"I guess that makes sense," James admitted. "So why not you, then, Zane?"

Zane adopted a beatific expression, eyes raised to the ceiling, "Because I'm as pure as the wind-driven snow. And besides, I'm never setting foot on that island again. Too freaky for me by far."

"But I couldn't even steal the robe if I wanted to," Ralph said, furrowing his brow. "Not with Zane's Locking Spell on it. James is the only one who can open the trunk."

"You could just drag the whole trunk out there, I suppose," James replied. "Where there's a will, there's a way."

"Fortunately, there's no will," Ralph said gravely.

Zane pushed his empty coffee cup away. “The dryad, or whatever it was, wouldn’t necessarily know about the extra Locking Spell on the trunk, anyway. But the fact that it happened to both of you sure proves something wants that robe, and knows we have it. If it isn’t Jackson or any of his crew, then who?”

James said, “Remember what the green dryad told us? She said that the trees were waking, but that many of them had... how did she put it?”

Zane nodded, remembering. “She said they’d ‘gone over’, like milk past its expiration date or something. Some of the trees are bad, in other words. They’re on the side of chaos and war. You think yours and Ralph’s blue dryad was one of the bad ones trying to sound nice?”

“Makes sense,” Ralph said. “She was all beautiful and smiles and everything, but I had a pretty strong feeling that if I didn’t bring her the robe, that smile could turn hungry pretty fast. That’s what scared me. That and her fingernails.” He shuddered.

“So this is way bigger than just us and the Merlin conspirators,” Zane said seriously. “The tree spirits are involved. And who knows what else, too. For all we know, everything in the magical world might be taking a side.”

“Either way,” James said earnestly, “it proves that these relics are incredibly powerful. In the wrong hands, who knows what kind of damage they could do? That’s why we have to get the staff away from Tabitha.”

“I don’t understand why we don’t just get your dad in here,” Ralph interjected. “It’s his job to deal with this kind of stuff, isn’t it?”

“Because they have rules they have to follow,” James replied wearily. “They’d have to bring in a team of Aurors to scour the grounds. They wouldn’t just go nick Tabitha’s broom because we said it was the Merlin staff, even if we did turn over the robe. There’d be magical sweeps, investigating every unusual source of power. It could go on for days. By the time they got around to checking out Tabitha, she’d have gotten the broom out of here. Jackson and Delacroix might sniff trouble and escape, too. They might even get the whole conspiracy together to go to this Hall of Elder’s Crossing and try to bring Merlin back. It wouldn’t work without the robe, of course, but then the throne and the staff would be lost, hidden and in the control of dark wizards.”

Ralph sighed. “All right, all right. I’m convinced. So we’ll try to capture the Merlin staff from Corsica. But that’s it, all right? Then we turn it all over to your dad and his pros. They clean up the mess and we can be the heroes. Whatever. OK?”

Zane nodded. “Yeah, I’m with you. Get the broom and we’re done. Agreed?”

James agreed. “So we need a plan. Any ideas?”

“It won’t be easy,” Ralph said firmly. “If we got lucky with Jackson’s briefcase, then we’ll need an act of God to pull this one off. The Slytherin quarters are so thick with guard hexes and Anti-Spying spells that they almost hum. They’re the most suspicious lot I’ve ever met.”

“Tricksters always expect to be tricked,” Zane said wisely. “But there’s one thing we’re forgetting, and it may even be more important than capturing the Merlin staff.”

“What’s more important than that?” James asked.

“Keeping the relic we’ve got,” Zane answered simply, meeting James’ eyes. “Something out there knows we have the robe, and it’s already tried once to get it from you. I don’t know what kind of magic that was, but you both seem pretty convinced that it transported you to the island straight out of Hogwarts halls, right?”

James and Ralph exchanged looks and then nodded at Zane.

“So,” Zane continued, “if Disapparition is impossible on Hogwarts grounds, then it used some other form of magic to get you there. That’s some powerful mojo. What’s to say it won’t try again?”

Ralph paled. “I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“Maybe it used up all its power the first time,” James said a little doubtfully.

“You two better hope so,” Zane said, looking back and forth between them. “Because it already tried asking nice. The next time, it won’t be so polite.”

An idea struck James and he shivered.

“What?” Ralph asked, seeing James’ face change.

“Remote Physio-Apparition,” James said in a hushed voice. “That’s what Professor Franklyn called Delacroix’s power to project a wraith of herself. It’s different from regular Apparition, because she just sends out something like a ghost of herself, but the wraith can still look solid and affect things. I looked it up. The ghost makes a solid version of itself out of whatever material is handy, and then wears that like a puppet. Somehow she used it to bring the Merlin throne here and hide it on the island without being detected.”

Zane frowned. “OK. So?”

“So what if that was how Ralph and I were sent out to the Grotto Keep? Ralph, you called it an out-of-body experience. What if that’s what it really was? Maybe we were forced to have a Remote Physio-Apparition! Only a wraith of ourselves went out to the grotto, but our bodies stayed in the corridors, just sort of... frozen.”

Ralph was clearly horrified by the thought. Zane looked thoughtful. “It seems to fit. Both of you said it happened when you were alone in the corridors. There’d be no one to see you both standing there on autopilot while your souls or whatever were strung out to the Grotto Keep.”

“But that’s Delacroix’s specialty,” Ralph said, shuddering. “You think she knows we got the robe somehow?”

James answered, “Maybe. She’s slippery as an eel. She might have figured it out and not even told Jackson. Maybe she wants all the glory for herself.”

“One thing is for sure, then,” Zane announced. “We can’t let you two be alone. My guess is that whoever or whatever is doing this doesn’t want the secret to get out. That’s why they waited until you two were alone for a few minutes. If we keep people around you, then maybe it won’t try again.”

Ralph was as white as a statue. “Unless it gets really, really desperate.”

“Well, yeah,” Zane agreed. “There’s always that possibility. But we can’t do anything in that case, so let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“That makes me feel loads better,” Ralph moaned.

“Come on,” James said, getting up from the breakfast table. “It’s getting late and the house-elves are giving us the eye. It’s time we got out of here before somebody notices we’re planning something.”

The three boys wandered out onto the chilly grounds and talked of other things for a while, then, having separate house-related obligations, went their separate ways for the rest of the day.

The next week was frustratingly busy. Neville Longbottom assigned one of his very unusual but painstakingly demanding essays. This led to James spending an inordinate amount of time in the library, researching the endless uses of spynuswort, an endeavor that was further complicated by the fact that every part of the spynuswort plant, from the leaves to the stem to the root and even its seeds, was used in any number of applications, from healing skin diseases to waxing broomsticks. James had just added the seventy-ninth entry to his scribbled list when Morgan Patonia sat down at the table across from him with a heavy sigh. Morgan, a first-year Hufflepuff, was also in Herbology and working on her spynuswort essay.

“You only need to list five uses,” Morgan stated when she saw James’ list. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Five?” James said weakly.

Morgan gave James a look of somehow delighted disdain. “Professor Longbottom only assigned us to write about spynuswort because it’s one of the three most useful plants in the magical world. If we were to write about every one of its uses, we’d be turning in encyclopedias, you silly boy.”

James' face heated. "I knew that!" he said, aiming for aloof arrogance and hitting only wounded petulance. "I just forgot. Can't blame me for being thorough, can you?"

Morgan tittered, obviously thrilled that James had wasted so much time. James packed up a few minutes later and moved to the Gryffindor common room, annoyed but simultaneously relieved. At least his essay was finished. In fact, since he'd already written about twenty-three spynuswort uses, he probably stood to get loads of extra credit. Just as long as Neville didn't figure out that the thoroughness of James' report simply meant James hadn't been paying much attention in class.

Twice, James saw Professor Delacroix in the corridors and had the haunting sensation that she was watching him. He never actually saw her eyes on him, but since she was blind, that hardly mattered anyway. James remembered the way Delacroix had maneuvered the tureen of gumbo with her ugly graperoot wand at the Alma Aleron dinner, never spilling a drop. He had a suspicion that Delacroix had ways of seeing that didn't rely at all upon her useless eyes. In fact, that could explain how she might have noticed that Jackson's briefcase was different. The *Visum-ineptio* charm only worked on what people saw with their eyes, didn't it? Still, she never said anything or even so much as paused in her stride when she passed him. James decided that he was simply being paranoid. Besides, as Zane pointed out, what difference did it make? She might be the one trying to trick Ralph and James into taking the relic robe out to the Grotto Keep, or it might be some other force entirely. Either way, they had to be on guard never to be alone, and in the end, the source of the threat didn't really matter anyway.

James had begun to realize just how hard it was to never be alone. He would've thought, in a school the size of Hogwarts, it would've been quite rare, anyway. Now that he was paying attention, he realized he'd been on his own on the grounds or in the halls several times each day, whether crossing the grounds to get to Neville Longbottom's Herbology class after Transfiguration or just going to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Arranging to never be alone even in these circumstances was an annoying chore, but Zane, to James' surprise, was consistently adamant about it.

"Even if we did capture that robe by a string of completely freakish lucky breaks, I'm not gonna let it slip out of our hands because we got careless," he told James one day, walking him to the Herbology greenhouses. "It's the Merlin conspirators' carelessness that's been working for us. I'm not gonna do them any favors like that."

One day, James introduced Ralph and Zane to the Protean Charm as a means of communicating if ever an emergency chaperone was needed. James had ordered three novelty rubber ducks from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, giving one each to Zane and Ralph.

"The Protean Charm means that if I squeeze my duck, both of yours will sound as well," James explained, giving his duck a tweak.

"Sod off!" all three ducks quacked in unison.

“Excellent,” Zane said, giving his own duck a firm squeeze, resulting in a chorus of happy insults. “So if either of you find yourselves alone or need me to take you to the bathroom, you just honk on this and I come running, eh?”

“Ugh,” Ralph said, staring at his duck with distaste. “I hate this. It’s like being three years old again.”

“Hey, if you want to go getting zapped off to meet with some unhappy tree spirit again...,” Zane said, shrugging.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it,” Ralph replied, annoyed. “I just hate it, is all.”

Zane turned back to James. “So how will I know which one of you quacked for me?”

James produced a black marker and drew a small J on the bottom of his duck. “Take a look at yours, now. Anything we do to a single duck will show up on all of them. When you hear the quack, just check the bottom of the duck and see whose initial shows up.”

“Very tight,” Zane said approvingly. He raised his duck and tweaked it as if he was saluting with it.

“Eat doxie poo!” the ducks quacked gaily.

“All right,” James said, putting his own duck in his backpack. “This’ll only work if we only use them in an emergency. Got it?”

“Why don’t they just squeak?” Ralph asked as he pocketed his.

“Ask a Weasley,” James answered dismissively.

At first, having to have Zane or somebody else around at all times was as annoying to James as it was to Ralph, but eventually, James got used to it and even began to like it. Zane would sit on a chair in the corner of the bathroom while James bathed, quizzing him on defensive spell pronunciations or Transfiguration terminology and restrictions. James learned that many of his Herbology classmates, including Morgan Patonia, had Charms class before Herbology. Knowing this, James was able to hurry from his Transfiguration class to the Charms classroom and then accompany Patonia and her friends to the greenhouses, thus avoiding the solitary trek across the grounds. Constantly being near people became an easy habit for James, and eventually, he nearly forgot he was doing it. In this fashion, the weeks melted past. The rawness of winter began to thaw into the fragile warmth of spring. Still, neither James, Ralph, nor Zane had come up with a plan to get Tabitha Corsica’s broomstick. Eventually, they determined, albeit reluctantly, that some group reconnaissance was required.

“I’m not liking this,” Ralph said as he led the other two to the door of the Slytherin common room. “I haven’t seen anyone other than Slytherins in here for months.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ralph,” Zane said, but his voice was less confident than usual. “We’ve got James’ magic map here. We can check it again, but according to it, most of your buddies are out watching the Slytherins practice for the tournament. Right, James?”

James had the Marauder’s Map unfolded in his hands. He studied it as he walked. “As far as I can tell, there’s only a couple of people in the Slytherin dorms, and none of them are people we need to worry about.”

“Are you sure you’re reading that thing right?” Ralph asked, plugging his ring into the eye socket of the snake sculpture on the gigantic wooden door. “Last I heard, you said you couldn’t even remember how to get it to work.”

“Well, it’s working, isn’t it?” James replied testily. In truth, he *was* worried about the accuracy of the map. He had remembered the phrase to get the map to open and display the grounds, but as his dad had feared, the castle had changed rather a lot since the map had been created by Moony, Prongs, Padfoot, and Wormtail. Irregular chunks of the map were completely blank, and each blank section was marked with a notation that read *redrawing required, please see Messrs. Prongs and Padfoot for assistance*. James could only guess that his grandfather and Sirius Black had been the chief artists who’d plotted the map, but since both were long since dead, there would apparently be no redrawing of the map to fill in the rebuilt areas. The tiny names that marked the locations of everyone on campus could still be seen moving here and there, but as they entered one of the blank areas, their marker and name would flicker out. Fortunately, the Slytherin quarters were under the lake, and therefore had been very little damaged in the Battle of Hogwarts (Ralph had learned that only the main entry had been destroyed in the siege). James could see the entire warren of Slytherin rooms and halls on the Marauder’s Map.

The snake sculpture asked its questions. Ralph announced himself and explained who James and Zane were, and that they were friends. The glowing green snake eye examined Zane and James for a long moment, and then unlocked the complicated system of bolts and bars that secured the door.

The three boys couldn’t help skulking as they moved through the apparently deserted Slytherin common room. The brackish green sunlight, filtered by the lake water above the stained-glass ceilings, filled the room with murky shadows. The fire was a dull red glow in the gigantic fireplace, which was sculpted in marble to resemble an open snake’s mouth.

“Nothing like reading a good book in front of gaping doom,” Zane murmured, passing the fireplace. “So where do they keep their broomsticks, Ralph?”

Ralph shook his head. “I told you already, I don’t know. I just know there isn’t a common locker or anything, like the Gryffindors or Ravenclaws. Most of these guys don’t trust each other all that much. Everybody has a private closet with a special magical key. Besides, their brooms aren’t here now, anyway, are they? They’ve all got them out at the Quidditch pitch.”

“We aren’t here to grab it now,” Zane answered, peering around the common room. “We’re just here to scope out where they might hide them.”

Even in the middle of a spring day, the Slytherin rooms were a pall of shifting green dimness. “*Lumos*,” James said, illuminating his wand and holding it aloft. “This hall goes back to the boys’ quarters, right Ralph?”

“Yeah. The girls’ rooms are on the other side, up those stairs.”

Zane threaded through the furniture of the common room, aiming for the stairs. “Panty raid in the Slytherin girls’ quarters. I’m on it.”

“Wait,” James said sharply. “It’ll be charmed, you know. No boys are allowed in any of the girls’ quarters. You go up there, it’ll be sure to set off some sort of alarm.”

Zane stopped, glancing at James, and then turned back to the stairway. “Drat. They thought of everything, didn’t they?”

“Besides,” Ralph said from across the room, “they’re called ‘knickers’ around here.”

“You say ‘potato’, I say ‘patata’...,” Zane muttered.

“Can we get back to why we’re here, after all?” James said as loudly as he dared. “We’re supposed to be looking for ways to get to Tabitha’s broom. Even if all we can do is figure out where she keeps it.”

“Believe it or not,” Zane said primly, “that’s what I was thinking of. For all we know, she sleeps with the thing. Even if she doesn’t, you can bet she keeps it near enough to guard. That means getting into the girls’ quarters, doesn’t it?”

James shook his head. “Not possible. I’m beginning to see how helpful it was for my dad to have Aunt Hermione as part of his crew. He could’ve sent her up to check things out. We’re pretty much stuck, though.”

As James finished speaking, a noise came from the stairway. The three boys froze guiltily, looking toward the stairs. There was a shuffling of small feet, and then a tiny house-elf came down balancing a basket of rumpled clothing on its head. The elf stopped, seeing the three boys staring at it.

“Many pardons, masters,” the elf said, and James could tell by the timbre of its voice that it was a female. “Just collecting the washing, if you please.” Her bulbous eyes flicked between the three of them. She seemed disconcerted to have elicited such keen interest. James realized she was probably used to being completely ignored, if she was seen at all.

“Not a problem, Miss...” Zane said, affecting a small bow and taking a step back from the stairs.

The elf didn't move. Her eyes followed Zane's movement with increasing consternation. "Excuse me, master?"

"Your name, Miss?" Zane replied.

"Ah. Er. Figgle, master. I apologize, master. Figgle isn't accustomed to masters and mistresses speaking to her, master." The elf seemed to be nearly vibrating with nervousness.

"I'm sure that is true, Figgle," Zane said understandingly. "You see, I'm a member of an organization you may have heard of. We're called the... uh..." Zane glanced back at James, his eyes wide. James remembered telling Zane and Ralph about Aunt Hermione's equal rights for elves organization.

James stuttered, "Oh. Yeah, S.P.E.W. The Society for the Promotion of, uh, Elfish Welfare?"

"Yes, what he said," Zane said, spinning back to Figgle, who flinched. "S.P.E.W. You've heard of us, no doubt. We help those who elf themselves."

"Figgle hasn't, master. Not a bit. Figgle has loads of work, master."

"That's exactly the point, my dear Figgle. We at S.P.E.W. are working to lessen that load. In fact, as an act of good faith, I'd like to help you now. Please, might I help you carry that?"

Figgle looked positively horrified. "Oh, *no*, master. Figgle couldn't! Master shouldn't mock Figgle, sir!"

James could see where Zane was heading with this charade, but was doubtful it would get anywhere. House-elves, especially those who worked amongst the Slytherins, were often mistreated and tricked by their masters. Figgle looked as if she was about to burst into tears from fear.

Zane knelt down, bringing himself eye-level to the trembling house-elf on the second step of the stairs. "Figgle, I'm not going to hurt you or get you into trouble. I promise. I'm not even a Slytherin. I'm a Ravenclaw. You know Ravenclaws?"

"Figgle does, master. Figgle collects the Ravenclaws' wash on Tuesdays and Fridays. Ravenclaws use less scent than Slytherins, master." The elf was babbling, but she seemed a bit calmer.

"I'd like to help you, Figgle. Surely there is more to carry. May I carry it for you?"

Figgle pressed her lips together very hard, obviously caught on the knife edge between her fear of a mean prank and her duty to do what she was told. Her tennis ball-sized eyes studied Zane, then, finally, she nodded once, quickly.

"Excellent, Figgle. You're a good elf," Zane said soothingly. "There is more laundry upstairs, isn't there? I see you're piling it there by the door. I'll gather the rest for you." He made to step forward onto the stairs.

“Oh, no, master! Wait!” Figgle said, raising her hand. The basket on her head wobbled a bit and she steadied it easily. “Master will break the boundary. Figgle mustn’t let the others see she is being helped.” Figgle jumped lightly down the last two steps and turned toward the stairs. She raised her hand and snapped her fingers. Something changed about the doorway. James would have sworn that something like a light had been turned off, although the actual lighting in the room hadn’t changed. “Now master can go up. But please, master...” Again, Figgle seemed tortured on the edge of fear and obedience. “Please, master mustn’t touch anything but the basket. Then Figgle will take all the wash to the basements. Please?” She seemed to be pleading to get this over with and be gone as soon as possible.

“Of course,” Zane answered, smiling. With only the slightest pause, he put his foot on the first step. Nothing happened. “I’ll be right back, guys,” Zane said over his shoulder, then trotted up the steps.

James let out a pent breath and heard Ralph doing the same. Figgle watched Zane tramp up the stairs, then glanced worriedly back at James and Ralph. Ralph shrugged at her and smiled. It was, James thought, a rather ghastly smile. Figgle didn’t seem to notice. She weaved through the furniture, balancing the huge basket easily, and then tipped it onto a large pile near the door.

“James,” Ralph said quietly, “the map.”

James nodded and opened the Marauder’s Map again. He looked first toward the upper right area of the map, where a set of neat drawings illustrated the Quidditch pitch and grandstands. Dozens of names were crammed together there, most in and around the grandstands, but a few swooped around the pitch. The Slytherin practice session was still going on, although there seemed to be fewer people on brooms at the moment. They were probably gathered on the ground nearby, talking strategy or something. He glanced over the names ranged between the pitch and the grandstands. There was Squallus, Norbert, Beetlebrick, and a few others James didn’t know.

Figgle raised her hands in the same gesture James had seen the house-elves in the Great Hall use to gather up the tablecloths. The pile of laundry clumped into a large ball and a bed sheet cocooned around it, the four corners tying at the top. Figgle tossed a small puff of pink powder onto the gigantic ball of laundry and snapped her fingers again. The ball of laundry vanished, presumably to reappear in the basements. She looked nervously at the stairs.

“Well?” Ralph asked James in a tight, worried voice.

“I can’t see Tabitha,” James answered, trying to keep his voice calm. “Or Philia Goyle. They aren’t out on the pitch anymore as far as I can see.”

“What? Well, where are they?”

“I don’t know. They seem to be off the map at the moment.”

Figgle was looking at them, her eyes wide and alert. She seemed to sense something was even more wrong than it had been a minute ago. James studied the Marauder’s Map keenly, watching the huge blank

spots to see if Goyle and Corsica would appear out of them. He kept a sharp eye on the blank spot at the door to the Slytherin quarters.

“Oh, no,” he said, his eyes widening. “Here they come! What are they doing here now?”

“Get rid of the map!” Ralph said, his face going pasty white. “Come on! Zane!” he called up the steps. There was no answer.

Figgle’s expression had gone from alarm to raw panic. “Mistress Corsica is coming! Figgle has done an awful thing! Figgle will be punished!” She bolted for the stairs, snapping her fingers as she went. There was that sudden sensation of change, as if an invisible light had popped back on, and James knew that the Boundary Charm over the stairs was in place again. There was a clatter of footsteps and muffled voices both from upstairs as well as from the front door of the common room. James balled the Marauder’s Map roughly and jammed it into his open backpack. Ralph threw himself onto the nearest couch, trying to affect a scene of lazy indolence. The door swung open just as James re-shouldered his backpack and turned.

Tabitha Corsica and Philia Goyle stepped through the doorway. Their eyes fell on James and both of them went silent. Tabitha was dressed in a sport cloak and black capris, her broomstick over her shoulder. Her hair was in a neat ponytail, and even though she had, only minutes before, been swooping over the Quidditch pitch on her unusually magical broom, she appeared as cool and fresh as a tulip. She spoke first.

“James Potter,” she said mildly, having almost instantly recovered from her surprise at seeing him. “What a pleasure.”

“What are you doing here?” Philia demanded, scowling.

“Philia, don’t be rude,” Tabitha said, moving into the room and passing James breezily. “Mr. Potter is as welcome among us as I’m sure we would be amongst the Gryffindors. If we don’t have goodwill during these difficult times, what have we got? Good afternoon, Mr. Deedle.”

Ralph croaked something from the couch, looking remarkably awkward and uncomfortable. Philia continued to stare hard at James, her expression openly hostile, but she remained silent.

“It’s a shame about the Gryffindor Quidditch team,” Tabitha called from a corner of the room as she hung up her cloak. “We always love a Gryffindor versus Slytherin match for the tournament, don’t we, Ralph? I’m sure it pains your friends not to be out scrimmaging with us as we speak, James. Please give them our sympathies. By the way...,” Tabitha crossed the room again, heading toward the stairs to the girls’ sleeping quarters, “I saw several of the Ravenclaw players out at the pitch studying our drills. Interesting that your friend, Zane, wasn’t among them. You haven’t seen him, have you?” She tapped her broomstick on the floor idly, watching James’ face.

James shook his head, not daring to speak.

“Hm,” Tabitha murmured thoughtfully. “Curious, that. Nevertheless. Come, Philia.”

James watched, horrified, as Tabitha and Philia began to climb the steps. He thought furiously, trying to invent a quick diversion, but nothing came.

“Sod off!” a pair of muffled voices suddenly squeaked.

Both Tabitha and Philia stopped in their tracks. Philia, on the first step, whipped around angrily. Tabitha, ahead of her, turned much more slowly, a look of polite wonderment on her face.

“Did you say something?” she asked James slowly.

James coughed. “Er, no. Sorry. Got a, uh, frog in my throat.”

Tabitha watched him for a long moment, then tilted her head slightly and narrowed her eyes at Ralph. Finally, she turned away and disappeared up the rest of the stairs with Philia following, glancing back furiously. After a few moments, their footsteps could be heard from above. There were no angry screams or sounds of struggle.

“Grotty blighter!” quacked the muffled voices again.

“That crazy loon!” Ralph rasped, jumping up and grabbing his bag. “What’s he doing?”

“Come on!” James said, lunging toward the door. “If he’s still up there, we can’t help him.”

They both ran out into the hallway and threaded their way around several random corridors before finally stopping. Panting and hearts pounding, they dug their rubber ducks out of their bags, each examining his own even though they were identical. Two words were scrawled on the bottom of the ducks in black ink: *Laundry room!*

“That crazy loon!” Ralph said again, but he was almost laughing with relief. “Figgle just took him down to the cellars with the rest of the dirty sheets! I say we leave him there.”

James grinned. “No, let’s go get him before they try to stick him in the wringer. He probably deserves it, but first, I want to know what he might have found out.”

The two boys ran to find the washrooms in the cellars. James stopped only once to ask directions from an annoyingly observant servant in a painting of a gaggle of dining knights.



“I hardly had two minutes to look around before Figgle came up the stairs like a cannonball,” Zane told James and Ralph when they found him in the washrooms. “She threw a handful of pink dust at me, and then pow! I’m down here.”

Ralph was looking around in awe at the enormous copper vats and the clanking machinery of the washers. Elves bustled around them, ignoring the three boys completely as they moved through the hive of their basement work space. Two elves on a catwalk above the vats were dumping wheelbarrows of powdered soap into the frothing water. White flakes filled the air and stuck like snow in the boys’ hair.

“Trust me, this all gets a lot less interesting after two minutes or so,” Zane said tersely. “Especially when the Lollipop Guild here won’t let you leave.” Three elves were clustered around Zane, looking at him with obvious hostility.

“Figgle brings a human down to the washrooms, we keeps him until someone explains why,” the oldest and grumpiest elf said in a gravelly voice. “S’policy. Humans interfering with elf work is against Hogwarts Code of Conduct and Practices, section thirty, paragraph six. So, then, who be you two?”

James and Ralph exchanged blank looks. Ralph said, “We’re his... well, we’re his friends, aren’t we? We came to bring him back upstairs.”

“Did you, then?” the elf said with a penetrating glare. “Figgle tells a story about this human trying to do her work, she does. Says he was going on about elf welfare and such bilge. She was fair upset. Can’t ‘ave that sort of thing, you know. We gots a coalition agreement with the school.”

“He won’t do it again,” James soothed. “He meant well, but he’s a bit dim about such things, isn’t he? I’m sorry. He got out of our hands for a minute. Won’t happen again.”

Zane acted offended, but stayed wisely silent. The head elf scowled thoughtfully at James. James was used to elves being subservient and meek or at least politely surly. Here, in their working realm, the rules appeared to be quite different. The elves had a coalition agreement with the school, the head elf had said. It almost sounded like they’d unionized, and that an essential rule of the elf union was that only elves did elf work. Perhaps they viewed it as job security. James wasn’t sure if Aunt Hermione would view this as an improvement or a setback.

Finally, the head elf grumbled, “I’m going against my better judgments, you know. The three of yous are on probation. Anymore interference with elfish protocol and I’ll ‘ave you before the Headmistress. We gots a coalition agreement, you know.”

“So I hear,” Zane muttered, rolling his eyes.

“But you don’t even know our names,” Ralph pointed out. “How are we on probation if you don’t know who we are?” James elbowed him in the ribs.

The head elf grinned at his fellows, who smiled back a bit disconcertingly. “We’re elves,” he said simply. “Now off with yous, and let’s hope we don’t see you again.”

The corridors leading out of the washrooms were, not surprisingly, small and short, with half-sized steps that forced James, Zane, and Ralph to mince carefully as they climbed them.

“I don’t know whether to congratulate you or kick you,” Ralph said to Zane. “You almost got us caught by Corsica and Goyle.”

“But I did get into the Slytherin girls’ sleeping quarters,” Zane pointed out with a grin. “How many people can say that?”

“Or would want to?” James added.

“Be nice or I won’t tell you what I found.”

“It better be good,” said Ralph.

“It’s not,” Zane sighed. “The girls’ quarters have big wooden wardrobes alongside each bed. Only one of them was open, but I got a peek inside. Let’s just say I’m not wondering where Tabitha keeps her broom anymore.”

They reached a larger door at the end of a flight of miniscule stairs. James pushed it open, thankful to be out of the heat and noise of the washrooms. “What do you mean?”

“Well, they’re magical wardrobes, of course, although they don’t lead to any fairy wonderlands. The one I looked into looked like a combination vanity and walk-in closet. Seemed like a boutique had exploded in there, to tell you the truth. One of those really froofy ones, but with a gothic-vampire flair to it. There was a bottle of vanishing cream on the vanity, and from the looks of it, I don’t think the vanishing part was a metaphor.”

“All the girls have a wardrobe like that?” Ralph asked.

“Sure looked like it.”

James frowned. “Our chances of getting into the Slytherin girls’ quarters again are pretty much zero. And even if we could, how would we even know which wardrobe was Corsica’s, much less even get it open?”

“I *told* you this was going to be right impossible,” Ralph reminded James.

“Smelled like my grandma’s dresser in there, too,” Zane said.

“Will you let off with the details?” James exclaimed. “This is serious. We still don’t know where the Hall of Elder’s Crossing is or when Jackson and Delacroix are planning to bring the elements together. For all we know, it could be tonight.”

“So?” Ralph said. “Like you said, they can’t do anything without all the relics.”

Zane sighed, turning sober. “Yeah, but if they try it and nothing works, then they’ll hide the rest of the relics and we’ll never get to them.”

Ralph threw up his hands. “Well? There’s got to be another way, then. I mean, she has to take the broom out of her wardrobe sometimes, right? We saw her with it today. What if we nick it somehow during a Quidditch match or something?”

Zane grinned. “I like that. Especially if we can do it when she’s a hundred feet or so in the air.”

“Impossible again,” James said in frustration. “Ever since my dad’s day, there’ve been protective spells all around the pitch to keep people from interfering with matches. There were a few instances where dark wizards tried to use spells to hurt him or throw him off his broom. Once, a bunch of Dementors swarmed right onto the pitch. Ever since, there’ve been boundary areas set up by the officials. No spells can get in or out.”

“What’s a Dementor?” Ralph asked, his eyes widening.

“You don’t want to know, Ralph. Trust me.”

“Well, then, looks like we’re back to square one,” Zane said dourly. “I’m all out of ideas.”

Ralph stopped suddenly in the middle of the corridor. Zane bumped into the larger boy, stumbling backwards, but Ralph didn’t seem to notice. He was staring hard at one of the paintings lining the corridor. James noticed it was the one they had stopped at earlier to ask for directions to the laundry room. The very observant servant in the rear corner of the painting had caught James’ attention on the way down, but only as someone they could get directions from. James had become almost inured to the random, watchful characters in the paintings all over Hogwarts. The servant stared sullenly out at Ralph as the knights in the painting hoisted their tankards and turkey drumsticks, slapping each other happily on their partially armored backs.

“Oh, great,” Zane said, rubbing his shoulder where he’d run into Ralph. “Look what you’ve done, James. Now *Ralph’s* obsessed with every fifteenth painting. And not even the good ones, if you ask me. You two are the weirdest art lovers I’ve ever met.”

James took a step closer to the painting as well, studying the servant standing in the shadowy background with a large cloth over his shoulder. The figure took a half-step backward, and James felt sure that it was trying to blend further into the dim recesses of the painted hall. “What, Ralph?” he asked.

“I’ve seen that before,” Ralph answered in a distracted voice.

“Well, we just stopped at this painting not ten minutes ago, didn’t we?”

“Yeah. It looked familiar then, too, but I couldn’t place it. He’s standing different now...”

Ralph suddenly dropped to one knee, flinging his backpack onto the floor in front of him. He unzipped it quickly and dug inside, almost frantically, as if worried that whatever inspiration had struck him would flee before he could confirm it. He finally produced a book, gripped it triumphantly, and stood up again, riffling toward the back. Zane and James crowded behind him, trying to see over Ralph's broad shoulders. James recognized the book. It was the antique potions book his mum and dad had given Ralph for Christmas. As Ralph flipped through the pages, James could see the notes and formulae that crowded the margins, crammed alongside doodled drawings and diagrams. Suddenly, Ralph stopped flipping. He held the book open with both hands and slowly raised it so that it was level to the observant servant in the background of the painting. James gasped.

"It's the same dude!" Zane said, pointing.

Sure enough, there, in the right-hand margin of one of the last pages of the potions book, was an old pencil sketch of the observant servant. It was unmistakably the same figure, right down to the hook nose and the sullen, stooped pose. The painted version recoiled from the book slightly, and then crossed the hall as swiftly as it could without actually running. It stopped behind one of the pillars lining the opposite side of the painted hall. The knights at the table ignored it. James, watching intently, narrowed his eyes.

"I knew it looked familiar," Ralph said triumphantly. "He was in a different position when we first came across him, so I didn't place it straight off. Just now, though, he was in exactly the same pose as the drawing in this book. Now, *that* is weird."

"Can I see?" James asked. Ralph shrugged and handed the book to James. James bent over it, flipping back to the front of the book. The margins in the first hundred pages were filled mostly with notes and spells, many with sections scribbled out and rewritten in a different color, as if the writer of the notes was refining his work. By the middle of the book, though, drawings and doodles began to crowd in with the notes. They were sketchy, but quite good. James recognized many of them. Here was a rough sketch of the woman in the background of the painting of the king's court. A few pages later he found two quite detailed drawings of the fat wizard with the bald head from the painting of the poisoning of Peracles. Again and again, he recognized the sketches as the characters in the paintings all over Hogwarts, the secondary figures who'd been watching James and his friends with avid, unconcealed interest.

"Amazing," James said in a low, awed voice. "All these drawings are from paintings all over the school, you see?"

Ralph squinted at the drawings in the book, then back at the painting again. He shrugged. "It's weird, but not all that amazing, is it? I mean, the guy who owned this book was probably also a student here, right? Sounds like he was a Slytherin, like me. That's why your dad gave me the book. So whoever he was, he liked art. Lots of art lovers sketch from paintings. Big deal."

Zane's brow furrowed as he looked back and forth between the drawing of the observant servant and his painted equivalent, who was still skulking near the pillars in the background. "No, these aren't just sketches," he said, shaking his head slowly. "These are the originals, or so close it's impossible to tell the

difference. Don't ask me how I know. I just know. Whoever sketched these drawings was either a master forger... or he was the actual artist."

Ralph thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head. "That doesn't even begin to make sense. These paintings were painted at lots of different times. No way one bloke was responsible for all of them. Besides, a lot of these paintings are old. Way older than this book."

"It makes *perfect* sense," James said, clapping the potions book shut and looking down at the cover. "Whoever painted these didn't paint the whole paintings. Think about it: not a single one of these sketched characters is of a dominant person in any of the paintings. Every one of them is a drawing of some totally unimportant background character. Whoever drew these just *added* the characters into existing paintings."

Zane cinched up the corner of his mouth and furrowed his brow. "Why would anyone do that? It's like graffiti, but nobody would notice it except the guy who painted it. What's the fun in that?"

James was also thinking hard. He nodded slightly to himself, looking down at the old book in his hands again. "I think I have an idea," he said, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "We'll find out for sure. Tonight."



"Come on, Ralph!" James complained in a harsh whisper. "Quit tugging! You're yanking it up. You can see my feet!"

"I can't help it," Ralph moaned, crouching down as far as he could. "I know you said your dad and his mates used to do this all the time, but one of *them* was a girl, remember?"

"Yeah, and she didn't eat seven meals a day, either," Zane said.

The three of them shuffled down the darkened corridor, crammed under the Invisibility Cloak. They'd met at the base of the staircases, and apart from one tense moment when Steven Metzker, the Gryffindor prefect and brother of Noah, had passed them in the hall singing slightly off key, they had encountered no one. When they reached the intersection near the statue of the one-eyed witch, James directed them to stop. The three of them maneuvered clumsily into a corner and James opened the Marauder's Map.

“I don’t see why all three of us need to do this anyway,” Ralph complained. “I trust you two. You could’ve just told me about it tomorrow at breakfast.”

“You seemed plenty excited about it when we planned this, Ralphinator,” Zane whispered. “You can’t lose your nerve now.”

“It was daytime then. And I wasn’t born with any nerve, just so you know.”

“Shh,” James hissed.

Zane bent over the map. “Is anyone coming?”

James shook his head. “No, looks safe. Filch is in his office downstairs. I don’t know if he *ever* sleeps, but for now, at least, the coast is clear.”

Ralph straightened up, pulling the Invisibility Cloak a foot off the floor. “Then why are we under this thing at all?”

“It’s tradition,” James said without looking up from the map.

“Besides,” Zane added, “what good’s having an Invisibility Cloak if we don’t use it to float around the halls unseen every now and then?”

“There’s nobody to see us, anyway,” Ralph pointed out.

James directed them toward the right angle of the intersection and they shuffled on. Soon enough, they came to the gargoyle guarding the stairway to the Headmistress’ office. James could tell it was watching their feet under the raised cloak even though it remained perfectly still. James hoped that the password hadn’t changed since he’d accompanied Neville to the Headmistress’ office a few months earlier.

He cleared his throat and said quietly, “Er, Gallowater?”

The gargoyle, which was relatively new, having replaced the one that had been damaged in the Battle of Hogwarts, stirred slightly, making a sound like a mausoleum door grating open. “Is that the one with the forest green field and the sky blue and red patterns?” it asked in a carefully measured voice. “I can never remember.”

James conferred in harsh whispers with Ralph and Zane. “Forest green field? I don’t even know what it is! It’s just the word Neville used to get in!”

“How’d he answer the question, then?” Zane asked.

“It didn’t ask him any questions!”

“It’s a tartan pattern, I think,” Ralph rasped. “My grandmum is mad about them. Just say yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of *course* I’m not sure. Say no, then! How should I know?”

James turned back to the gargoyle, which seemed to be staring fixedly at James’ shoes. “Er, yeah, sure.”

The gargoyle rolled its eyes. “Lucky guess.” It straightened and stood aside, revealing the entry to the spiral staircase. The three boys shuffled toward it and clambered onto the lower steps. As soon as all three were on it, the staircase began to rise slowly, carrying them up with it. The hall outside the Headmistress’ office lowered into view before them, and they stumbled into it, swearing and jostling each other under the cloak.

“That’s it,” Ralph said in an annoyed voice. He yanked at the cloak, struggling out from underneath it, and then let out a stifled shriek. James and Zane pulled the cloak off their heads and glanced around nervously, looking for whatever had startled Ralph. The ghost of Cedric Diggory was standing in front of them, smiling mischievously.

“You’ve really got to stop doing that,” Ralph said breathlessly.

Sorry, Cedric said in his far-off voice. *I was asked to be here.*

“Who asked you?” James inquired, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. The hair on the back of his neck was still prickling. “How would anyone know we were coming here tonight?”

Cedric just smiled and then gestured toward the heavy door that led into the Headmistress’ office. It was shut tight. *How’d you plan to get past that?*

James felt his face heat a little in embarrassment. “I forgot about that,” he admitted. “Locked, is it?”

Cedric nodded. *Don’t worry about it. That’s why I’m here, I guess.* The ghost turned and walked effortlessly through the door. A moment later, the three boys heard the sounds of the lock being unbolted. The door swung open silently and Cedric grinned, welcoming them in. James entered first, and Zane and Ralph were surprised to see him turn immediately away from the Headmistress’ massive desk. The room was extremely dim but for the reddish light of the banked fireplace. James lit his wand and held it up.

“Get that thing out of my face, Potter,” a voice drawled quietly. “You’ll wake the rest with it, and I suspect that this is meant to be a private conversation.”

James lowered his wand again and glanced around at the rest of the portraits. All of them were sleeping in various poses, snoring gently. “Yeah, you’re right,” James agreed. “Sorry.”

“So you deduced a version of the truth, I see,” the portrait of Severus Snape said, his black eyes locked on James. “Tell me what you believe you know.”

“It wasn’t much of a deduction, really,” James admitted, glancing at Ralph. “He figured it out. He’s got the book.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “That dratted book has been more trouble than it was ever worth. I should’ve destroyed it when I had the chance. Do continue.”

James took a deep breath. “Well, I knew something was going on when I noticed all those characters in the paintings watching us. I also knew they all looked a little familiar, even though they were all really different. I don’t think I’d have made the connection if Ralph hadn’t shown me the drawings in the potions book, though. I knew the book had belonged to a Slytherin my dad had loads of respect for, so I thought of you and it all just came together. *You* painted all those characters into the paintings all over the school, and every one of them is a portrait of you, but in disguise. That’s how you’ve been watching us. You spread yourself out through all those paintings. And since you are the original artist, nobody else can ever destroy the portraits. It was your way of assuring you could always keep an eye on things, even after death.”

Snape studied James, scowling. Finally he nodded slightly. “Yes, Potter, quite true. Few knew it, but I had some natural inclination toward the task. Being adept at potions, mixing the necessary enchanted paints was the simple part. It did take me quite some time to hone my rendering skills enough to modify the paintings, but as with any other art, painting was mainly a matter of practice and study. I agree with you, however, that you’d have never made the connection if it weren’t for my own blind arrogance in allowing that book to continue to exist. I may have been a genius, but pride has been the downfall of greater geniuses than myself. Nevertheless, it has proved to be a very successful endeavor. I have been able to observe you and the rest of this school’s operations rather freely. So tell me: why do you come to me now? To gloat over your luck?”

“No,” James said firmly, and then paused. He didn’t want to say what he’d come to say. He was afraid Snape would laugh at him, or worse, refuse their request. “We came... we came to ask for your help.”

Snape’s expression didn’t change. He regarded James seriously for a long moment. “You came to ask for help,” he said, as if confirming he’d heard James correctly. James nodded. Snape narrowed his eyes slightly. “James Potter, I’d never have suspected it, but you have finally impressed me. Your father’s greatest weakness was his refusal to seek assistance from those better and more knowledgeable than him. He always required their help in the end, but usually to their great, and sometimes final, detriment. You seem to have thrown off that weakness, albeit reluctantly. If you had come to this realization a few weeks ago, we might not have had to rely on pure fortune and good timing to save you from a fate worse than death.”

James nodded again. “Yeah, thanks for that. I know it was you who sent Cedric to help when we were going to open Jackson’s case.”

“Foolhardy and ignorant, Potter. You might’ve known better, although I admit I’d have been surprised if you had. The robe is exceedingly dangerous and you are stupendously negligent to keep it here. As much as I am loath to admit it, you should turn it over immediately to your father.”

“What do you know about the Merlin conspiracy, then?” James asked excitedly, ignoring the rebuke.

“I know little more than you do, unfortunately, other than the wealth of knowledge I’ve accumulated through my studies of the legend and the multitude of previous attempts to facilitate the return of Merlinus Ambrosius. A study I can assure you would’ve proven far more helpful to you than your current ridiculous fantasies of capturing the Merlin staff.”

“Why are they ridiculous?” Zane asked, stepping a bit closer.

“Ah, the jester speaks,” Snape sneered in a low voice. “Mr. Walker, I believe.”

“It’s a fair question,” James said, glancing at Zane. “The staff is probably even more dangerous than the robe. We can’t let it be controlled by the sorts of people who believe Voldemort was just some misunderstood sweetie who wanted everybody to be pals.”

“And who might these people be, then, Potter?” Snape asked silkily.

“Well, Tabitha Corsica, for one.”

Snape regarded James with open contempt. “Typical Gryffindor prejudice.”

“Prejudice!” James exclaimed. “Whose house is it that believes that all Muggle-born wizards are weaker stock than the purebloods? Whose house invented the term ‘mudblood’?”

“Don’t *ever* say that word in front of me again, Potter,” Snape said dangerously. “You believe you speak of what you know, but let me save you from your ignorance by reminding you that what you know is as limited as it is one-sided. Easy judgments about individuals based on their house of origin is another of your father’s greatest mistakes. I’d hoped that you would surpass that as well, based on your own choice of companions.” Snape’s black eyes darted to Ralph, who had hung back, watching silently.

“Well, Ralph’s different, isn’t he?” James said weakly.

Snape responded quickly, his eyes still on the larger boy. “Is he? Different from what, Mr. Potter? What, precisely, do you believe you know about the members of Mr. Deedle’s house? Or, dare I ask, Mr. Deedle himself?”

“I know what the tree sprite told us,” James said rounding on the portrait, his voice rising in anger. “I know that there is a bloodline of Voldemort alive in these halls even now. His blood beats in a different heart. The heir of Voldemort is alive and he walks among us.”

“And what makes you so certain,” Snape said sharply, “that this heir is a Slytherin? *Or* a male?”

James opened his mouth to answer, and then closed it again. He realized that the dryad had never actually said either of those things. “Well, it just... makes sense.”

Snape nodded, the sneer creeping back into his face. “Does it? Perhaps you haven’t learned anything after all, then.” Snape sighed, and he seemed genuinely disappointed. “What did you come to ask, Potter? I see you are determined in your course regardless of what I say, so let’s get this over with.”

James felt small in front of the portrait of the former headmaster. Zane and Ralph stood further back, and James knew it was his question to ask. This was his battle more than it was theirs. His battle against the Merlin conspiracy, yes, but more importantly, his battle against himself and the shadow of his father.

He raised his eyes to Snape’s black gaze. “If we can’t get the Merlin staff, I need to go to the Hall of Elder’s Crossing. I need to stop them there, before they can hide the staff and the throne forever.”

James heard the movement of Zane and Ralph behind him. He turned back to them. “I won’t ask you two to come, but I’m committed. I have to try to stop them.”

Snape sighed hugely. “Potter, you really are just as foolish and preposterously self-absorbed as your father. Turn the robe over. Give it to your father or the Headmistress. They will know what to do. I will advise them. You cannot possibly hope to manage this on your own. You’ve impressed me once. Do try and accomplish that again.”

“No,” James said with conviction. “If I tell them, Jackson and Delacroix and whoever else will get away. You know it just like I do. Then two of the relics will be lost forever.”

“Without all three together, the power of the relics is broken.”

“But not destroyed,” James insisted. “They are still powerful on their own. We can’t let them be used by those who’d try to continue Voldemort’s work. We can’t risk them falling into the hands of Voldemort’s heir.”

Snape scowled. “*If* such a person exists.”

“That’s not a risk worth taking,” James countered. “Where is the Hall of Elder’s Crossing?”

“You do not know what you’re asking, Potter,” Snape said dismissively.

“We’ll find out somehow, James,” Zane said, stepping forward again. “We don’t need this old pile of paint to tell us. We’ve worked everything out so far. We’ll figure this out, too.”

“You’ve survived on suspicious good fortune and the interference of myself alone,” Snape growled. “Do not forget your place, boy.”

“It’s true,” Ralph said. James and Zane turned to look at him, surprised to hear him speak. Ralph swallowed and went on, “We *have* done pretty well so far. I don’t really know who you are, Mr. Snape, but as grateful as we are for you helping us when James put on the robe, I think James is right. We need to try to stop them and get the rest of the relics. You were a Slytherin, and you said that the things they say about

Slytherins aren't always right. Well, one of the things they say about Slytherins is that we always just look out for ourselves. I don't want that to be true. I'm with James and Zane, even if we fail. No matter what."

Snape had listened to this sudden speech from Ralph with a steely eye and a tight frown. When Ralph finished, he glanced at all three of the boys in succession, and then heaved another sigh. "You're all completely daft," he said flatly. "This is a pointless and destructive fantasy."

"Where's the Hall of Elder's Crossing?" James asked again.

Snape regarded him, shaking his head minutely. "As I said, Potter, you do not know what you're asking."

Zane spoke up. "Why not?"

"Because the Hall of Elders' Crossing is not a *place*, Mr. Walker. You, of all people, should have recognized that. If any of you had been paying even a shred of attention for the last several months, you'd know it. The Hall of Elders' Crossing is an *event*. Think about it for a moment, Mr. Walker. *Elders' Crossing*."

Zane blinked. "Elders," he said thoughtfully. "Wait a minute. That's what the astronomers of the Middle Ages called the astrological signs. The planets. They called them 'the Elder Ones'."

"So the *Hall* of Elder's Crossing..." James concentrated, and then widened his eyes in revelation. "The alignment of the planets! The Hall of Elders' Crossing is when all the planets cross each other in their paths. When they... make a hall!"

"The alignment of the planets," Ralph agreed in an awed voice. "It's not a place, but a time."

Snape stared hard at all three boys. "It's both," he said resignedly. "It's the moment the planets align, and it's the place that all three of the relics of Merlinus Ambrosius are brought together. That's when and where the return of Merlin can only be accomplished. That is his requirement. And unless I am greatly mistaken, if you mean to go through with this foolhardy plan of yours, you have less than one week."

Zane snapped his fingers. "That's why the voodoo queen's been drilling us to work out the exact moment of the alignment! She said it would be a night we'd never forget, and she meant it! That's when they mean to bring the relics together."

"The Grotto Keep," James whispered. "They'll do it there. The throne is already there." The other two boys nodded. James felt flushed with fear and excitement. He looked at the portrait of Severus Snape. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me. Take my advice. If you plan to go through with this, I will not be able to help you. No one will. Don't be a fool."

James backed away, extinguishing his wand and pocketing it. "Come on, you two. Let's get back."

Snape watched as James consulted the Marauder's Map. It wasn't Snape's first encounter with the map. On one occasion, the map had insulted him fairly cheekily. Having assured themselves that Filch was still in his office, the three crowded back under the Invisibility Cloak and shuffled back through the door of the Headmistress' office and into the hall. Snape considered waking Filch, who he knew was sleeping in his office with a half empty bottle of fire whiskey on his desk. One of Snape's self portraits resided in a hunting painting in Filch's office, and Snape could easily use that painting to alert Filch to the three boys' sneaking. Reluctantly, he decided not to. Like it or not, such petty tricks gave him little pleasure anymore. The ghost of Cedric Diggory, who Snape had come to recognize before anyone else, closed the door behind the boys and shot the bolt.

"Thank you, Mr. Diggory," Snape said quietly, amidst the snores of the other paintings. "Feel free to accompany them back to their dormitories. Or not. I don't much care."

Cedric nodded to Snape. Snape knew the ghost didn't like to talk to him. Something about a ghost talking to a painting seemed to disturb the boy. Nothing technically human on either end, Snape figured. Cedric dismissed himself and walked through the locked wooden door.

One of the paintings near Snape stopped snoring.

"He isn't precisely like his father, is he?" a thoughtful, older voice said.

Snape settled back into his portrait. "He's only like him in the worst of ways. He's a Potter."

"Now who's passing easy judgments?" the other voice said with a hint of teasing.

"It's not an easy judgment. I've watched him. He's as arrogant and foolish as the others that bore his last name. Don't pretend you don't see it."

"I see that he came to ask for your help."

Snape nodded grudgingly. "One can only hope that that instinct has a chance to mature. He asked for help only when he ran out of other options. And he didn't, you'll notice, actually take any of my advice."

The older voice was silent for a moment, and then asked, "Will you tell Minerva?"

"Perhaps," Snape said, considering. "Perhaps not. For now, I will do as I've done all along. I will watch."

"You believe there is a chance he and his friends might succeed, then?"

Snape didn't answer. A minute later, the older voice spoke again. "He is being manipulated. He doesn't know it."

Snape nodded. "I assumed there was no point in telling him."

"You're probably right, Severus. You have an instinct for such things."

Snape replied pointedly, “I learned when *not* to talk from the master, Albus.”

“Indeed you did, Severus. Indeed you did.”



15. THE MUGGLE SPY

Martin J. Prescott was a Reporter. He always thought of the word as if it was capitalized. For Martin, being a Reporter was more than a job. It was his identity. He wasn't just another face reading from a teleprompter or another name next to a dateline. He was what the producers in the age of the twenty-four-hour news cycle called 'a personality'. He accented the news. He framed it. He colored it. Not in any negative way, or so he firmly believed. He simply added that subtle dash of flair that made news into *News*, in other words, something people might want to watch or read. For one thing, Martin J. Prescott had the look. He wore white button-down shirts with jeans, and he usually had his shirt sleeves rolled up a bit. If he wore a tie, it was invariably of an impeccable style, but loosened just a tad: enough to say *yes, I've been working extremely hard, but I respect my viewers enough to maintain a degree of professionalism*. Martin was thin, youngish, with sharp, handsome features and very dark hair that always looked windblown and fabulous. But, as Martin was proud of saying to the attendees at the occasional Press Club breakfast, his appearance wasn't what made him a Reporter. It was his sense of people, and of news. He knew how to plug the one into the other in a way that produced the biggest emotional jolt.

But the last thing that made Martin J. Prescott a Reporter was that he loved the story. Where the other high-paid and high-profile news faces had long since assembled a team of lackeys to tramp far and wide, collecting footage and filming interviews while they themselves huddled in their dressing rooms reading about their ratings, Martin prided himself in doing all his own travel and research. The truth of it was that Martin enjoyed the reporting, but what he absolutely loved was the chase. Being a member of the press was like

being a hunter, except that the former aimed with a camera rather than a gun. Martin liked to stalk his prey himself. He delighted in the pursuit, in the blurry jostle of handheld camera footage, the shouted, perfectly-timed question, the long stakeout of a courtroom back door or a suspicious hotel room. Martin did it all himself, often alone, often filming himself in the act, providing his viewers breathless moments of high tension and confrontation. No one else did it like him, and this had made him famous.

Martin had, as they say of the very best Reporters, a nose for news. His nose told him that the story he was chasing right now, if it panned out, if he could simply provide the real, unadulterated footage, was quite possibly the story of a lifetime. Even now, crouched among the brush and weeds, dirty and salty with two days' worth of sweat, his fabulous hair matted and soiled with twigs and leaves, even after all the setbacks and failures, he still felt this was the story that would cement his career. In fact, the harder he'd had to work for it, the more doggedly he'd pursued it. Even after the ghost. Even after being kicked out of a third story window by a homicidal kid. Even after his harrowing brush with the gigantic spider. Martin viewed setbacks as proof of value. The harder it was, the more it was worth pursuing. He took a grim satisfaction in knowing that, had he merely hired a team of investigators to check this out, they'd have turned back months ago, when they'd first met the strange, magical resistance of the place, without a solitary blip of a story. This was the kind of story that could only be told by him. This, he told himself with satisfaction, was anchorman material. No more field reports. No more special interest segments. If this panned out, Martin J. Prescott would be able to pave his own way in any major newsroom in the country. But why stop there? With this under his belt, he could anchor anywhere in the world, couldn't he?

But no, he told himself. One mustn't think of such things now. He had a job to do. A difficult and outrageously demanding job, but Martin took pleasure in the sense that the hardest part was behind him. After months of plotting and arranging, planning and observing, the time had finally come for the big payoff, for all the bets to be called in. Granted, if this last phase of the hunt didn't work out exactly as planned, he'd walk away with nothing. He'd been unable to get any usable, convincing footage on his own, except for the handheld camera video of that incredible flying contest a few months back. That might have been enough, but even that had been lost, sacrificed--reluctantly!--to the gigantic spider during his escape through the woods. It didn't do to dwell on failures, though. No, this would work. It would go exactly as planned. It had to. He was Martin J. Prescott.

Still crouched at the perimeter of the forest, Martin checked the connections of his cell phone. Most of his field gear had gone completely buggy ever since he made it through the forest. His Palmtop barely worked at all, and when it did, it exhibited some very strange behavior. The night before last, he'd been trying to use it to access his office computer when the screen suddenly went entirely pink and began to display the lyrics to a rather rude song about hedgehogs. Fortunately, his camera and cell phone had worked relatively well until the incident with the spider. His phone was nearly all he had left now, and despite the fact that the display screen showed a strange mixture of numbers, exclamation marks and hieroglyphics, it did seem to be maintaining a connection. Satisfied, Martin spoke.

“I’m huddled outside the castle at this moment, hidden in the arms of the forest that has been my occasional home during these last grueling months. Up until now, I have simply watched, careful not to disturb what might only be a simple country school or a boarding facility, despite the reports of my sources. Still, I am confident that the time has finally come for me to approach. If my sources are wrong, I will merely be met with puzzlement and that rare brand of careful good humor that is the purview of the Scottish countryside. If, however, my sources prove correct, as I suspect, based on my inexplicable experiences so far, then I may well be walking into the clutches of my own doom. I am now standing. It is midmorning, about nine o’clock, but I see no sign of anyone. I am leaving the safety of my hiding place. I am entering the grounds.”

Martin crept carefully around the edge of the ramshackle cabin near the forest. The enormous, shaggy man he’d often spied in and around the cabin was not anywhere in sight. Martin straightened, determining to be bold about his initial approach. He began to cross the neatly cropped field between the cabin and the castle. In truth, he did not believe he was in grave peril. He had an innate sense that the greatest dangers were behind him, in that creepy and mysterious forest. He had indeed camped on the fringes of that forest, far on the side opposite the castle, where the trees seemed rather more normal and there were fewer unsettling noises in the night. Still, his travels back and forth through the densest parts of that forest had been strange, to say the least. Apart from the spider, which he had only escaped by sheer good luck, he hadn’t actually seen anything. In a sense, he thought it might have been better if he had. A known monstrosity, like the spider, is far easier to deal with than the unknown phantoms conjured by Martin’s imagination in response to the strange noises he’d heard on those long woodland walks. He’d been shadowed, he knew. Large things, heavy things, had followed him, always off to the left or right, hidden just behind the density of the trees. He knew they were watching him, and he also sensed that, unlike the spider, they were intelligent. They might have been hostile, but they were certainly curious. Martin had almost dared to call out to them, to demand they reveal themselves. Finally, remembering the spider, he’d decided that, after all, maybe an unseen monster that is merely curious is better than a seen monster that feels provoked.

“The castle, as I have mentioned, is positively huge,” Martin said into the small microphone clipped to his lapel. The microphone was connected to the phone on his belt. “I’ve travelled much of this continent and seen quite a variety of castles, but I’ve never seen anything so simultaneously ancient and yet immaculately maintained. The windows, apart from the one I was forced through those months ago, are beautifully sturdy and colorful. The stonework here doesn’t show so much as a crack...” This wasn’t entirely true, but it was true enough. “It is a beautiful spring day, fortunately. Clear and relatively warm. I am not hiding myself at all as I cross to the enormous gates, which are open. There... there seems to be a gathering over to my right, on a sort of field. I... I can’t quite tell, but it looks as if they are playing football. I can’t say that I expected that. They don’t seem to be paying me any attention. I am continuing to the gates.”

As Martin entered the gates, he finally began to be noticed. He slowed, still maintaining a steady course onward. His goal was simply to get as far into the castle as possible. He had purposely left his still camera behind. Cameras, in nearly every circumstance, incite resistance. People with cameras get thrown out

of places. Someone simply walking into a place, walking confidently and purposely, may be met with curiosity, but they are not usually stopped. At least, not until it is too late. The courtyard was dotted with young people moving here and there in knots. They wore black robes over white shirts and ties. Many carried backpacks or books. The ones nearest Martin turned to watch him past, mostly out of curiosity.

“There are... there are what appear for all the world to be... school pupils,” Martin said quietly into his microphone, sidling past students as he worked across the courtyard. “Young people in robes, all school age. They seem surprised at my presence, but not hostile. In fact, as I am now approaching the entryway into the castle proper, it appears that I have elicited the attention of virtually everyone. Excuse me.”

This last was said to Ted Lupin, who had just appeared in the doorway with Noah Metzker and Sabrina Hildegard. All three of them stopped talking instantly as the strange man in the white shirt and loosened tie slipped between them. The quill in Sabrina’s hair wobbled as she turned to watch him.

“Who’s he talking to?” Ted said.

“And who the ruddy hell is he?” Sabrina added. The trio turned in the open doorway, watching the man work his way carefully into the entry hall. Students parted for him, recognizing immediately that this man was rather out of place. Still, no one seemed particularly alarmed. There were even a few puzzled grins.

Martin went on speaking into his microphone. “More and more of what I must, for the time being, call students. There are dozens of them around me at the moment. I am moving through a sort of main hall. There are... chandeliers, great doorways. Statues. Paintings. The paintings... the paintings... the paintings...” For the first time, Martin seemed at a loss for words. He forgot the students gathering around him, watching him, as he took two steps toward one of the larger paintings lining the entry hall. In the painting, a group of ancient wizards were clustered around a large crystal ball, their white beards illuminated in its glow. One of the wizards noticed the staring man in the white shirt and tie. He straightened and scowled. “You’re out of uniform, young man,” the wizard exclaimed sternly. “You look a fright. I daresay you have a leaf in your hair.”

“The paintings... the paintings are...,” Martin said, his voice an octave higher than normal. He coughed and gathered himself. “The paintings are moving. They are... for lack of a better term, like painted movies, but alive. They are... addressing me.”

“I address equals, young man,” the wizard said. “I *command* the likes of you. Begone, ruffian.”

There was a smattering of laughter from the crowding students, but there was also a growing sense of nervousness. Nobody was ever amazed at the moving paintings. This man was either a nutter of a wizard, or he was... well, it was unthinkable. A Muggle could not get into Hogwarts. The students formed a large circle around him, as if he was a mildly dangerous animal.

“The students have hemmed me in,” Martin said, turning around, his eyes rather wild. “I’m going to attempt to break through, however. I must move further in.”

As Martin proceeded, the perimeter of students broke apart easily, following him. There was a murmuring now. Nervous chatter followed the man, and he began to raise his voice.

“I’m entering a large chamber. Quite high. I’ve been here before, but late at night, in the dark. Yes, this is the hall of moving staircases. Very treacherous. Remarkable mechanics at work here, and yet no sound of machinery at all.”

“What’s he saying about machinery?” someone in the crowding students called. “Who is this bloke anyway? What’s he doing here?” There was a chorus of confused responses.

Martin pushed on, turning past the staircases, almost shouting now. “My presence is beginning to cause some resistance. I may be stopped at any moment. I... I am bypassing the stairs.”

Martin turned a corner and found himself in the midst of a group of students playing Winkles and Augers in a bright alcove. He stopped suddenly and recoiled as the auger, an old Quaffle, stopped three inches from his face, floating and turning slowly.

“Oi, what’re you thinking just walking right into the middle of the sodding match, you?” one of the players called, yanking his wand up and retrieving the Quaffle. “Dangerous, that is. You need to watch yourself.”

“Flying... things!” Martin squeaked, straightening himself and smoothing his shirt frantically. “I... wands. Actual magical wands and levitating objects! This is perfectly remarkable! I’ve never seen...!”

“Hey now,” another of the Winkles and Augers players said sharply. “Who is this? What’s he going on about?”

Someone else yelled, “Who let him in? He’s a Muggle! Got to be!”

“It’s the man from the Quidditch pitch! The intruder!”

The crowd began to yell and jostle. Martin ducked past the Winkles and Augers players, losing some of the pursuing crowd. “I’m pressing in further still. Corridors leading everywhere. Here is... er, as far as I can tell, it is a hall of classrooms. I’m entering the first one...”

He burst into the first classroom on his right, followed by a stream of confused, yelling students. The room was long and recessed. The students attending the class turned in their seats, seeking the source of the interruption.

“Relatively normal, it seems, on the surface, at least,” Martin yelled over the growing din, scanning the room. “Students, textbooks, a teacher of some kind, who... who, who, whooo...”

Again, Martin’s voice rose and he seemed to be losing control of it. His eyes boggled and he ran out of breath. His mouth continued to work, making hoarse raspy sounds. At the front of the class, the ghostly Professor Binns, whose grasp on the temporal realm was tentative at best, had not yet noticed the

interruption. He droned on, his voice high and chiming, like wind in a bottle. The professor finally noticed the gasping form of Martin J. Prescott and stopped, frowning. “Who is this individual, might I ask?” Binns said, peering over his ghostly spectacles.

Martin finally dragged a great gulp of air. “A ghooooosst!” he declared tremulously, pointing at Binns. He began to totter. Just as the students near the doorway were shoved roughly aside by the advancing figures of Professor Longbottom and Headmistress McGonagall, flanked by Ted and Sabrina, Martin fell over in a dead faint. He landed hard across two desks at the rear of the room. The students occupying the desks threw their hands up, lunging to get out of the way. A bottle of ink fell to the floor and shattered.

Headmistress McGonagall approached the man swiftly and stopped a few feet away. “Can anyone please inform me who this man is,” she said in a strident voice, “and what he is doing fainting dead away in my school?”

James Potter shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. He looked at the man collapsed across the desks. He sighed deeply and said, “I think I can, ma’am.”



Fifteen minutes later, James, McGonagall, Neville Longbottom, and Benjamin Franklyn bustled into the Headmistress’ office, with Martin Prescott stumbling between them. Martin had regained consciousness halfway to the office, and had instantly shrieked in horror at the realization that he was being levitated along the corridor by Neville. Neville, in turn, had been so startled by Martin’s shriek that he’d nearly dropped him, but had recovered in time to lower the man fairly gently to the floor. Apart from James’ explanation that the intruder was the very same man he’d accidentally knocked through the stained-glass window and later seen on the Quidditch pitch, the trip to the Headmistress’ office had progressed with very little conversation. Once the door to her office had closed behind them, McGonagall spoke up.

“I only want to know who you are, why you are here, and most importantly, how you managed to gain entry,” she said furiously, stalking behind her desk but remaining upright. “Once we have resolved that, you will be removed forthwith, and with nary a glimmer of any memory of what you have seen, I can promise you that. Now speak.”

Martin swallowed and glanced around at the assembly. He saw James and grimaced, remembering the shattering glass and the sickly fall afterward. He took a deep breath. “First of all, my name is Martin J.

Prescott. I work for a news program called *Inside View*. And second of all,” he said, returning his gaze to the Headmistress, “I have been injured upon these grounds. I don’t wish to make a legal matter of it, but you must be aware that it is entirely within my rights to pursue compensation for those injuries. And somehow, I don’t get the impression that this domicile is *insured*, exactly.”

“How dare you?” McGonagall exclaimed, leaning over her desk and meeting Martin’s eyes. “You break into this castle, trespass where you have neither the right nor the understanding to carry yourself...” She shook her head, and then went on in a lower voice. “I will not be baited by threats. You are obviously of Muggle origin, so I will practice a modicum of patience with you. Answer my questions willingly or I will be more than happy to resort to more straightforward means of interrogation.”

“Ah,” Martin said, trying to sound confident despite the fact that he was trembling visibly. “You must mean something along the lines of this.” He reached into his shirt pocket and produced a small vial. James recognized it as the one he had seen in this man’s hand when he’d encountered him in the Potions closet. “Yes. I see by your faces that you know what this is. Took me a time to figure it out. *Veritaserum*, indeed. I put two drops into a coworker’s tea and I couldn’t get him to shut up for an hour. I learned things about him I hope I live to forget, I’ll tell you.”

“You tested an unknown potion on an unsuspecting person?” Franklyn interrupted.

“Well, I had to know what it did, didn’t I? I figured two drops wouldn’t hurt anyone.” He shrugged and lifted the bottle again, looking at the light through it. “Truth serum. If it was dangerous, you’d hardly have kept it right there on the shelf where just anyone could get to it.”

McGonagall’s face was white with fury. “In these halls, we rely on discipline and respect rather than cages and keys. Your friend is fortunate indeed that you didn’t happen upon a vial of Narglespike or tharff sap.”

“Don’t try to intimidate me,” Martin said, obviously quite intimidated in spite of himself. “I just wanted to show you that I know your tricks. I’ve been watching and studying you for quite some time. You won’t be getting me to drink any of your potions or performing any brainwashing tricks on me. I’ll answer your questions, but only because I expect you to answer some of mine, as well.”

Neville fingered his wand. “And why, pray tell, do you believe we won’t just bring in an Obliviator, have your mind wiped of all memory of this place, and drop you off at the nearest turnpike?”

Martin tapped the tiny microphone clipped to his lapel. “This is why. My voice, and everything all of you are saying, is being sent through my phone to a computer at my office. Everything is being recorded. In a small town not three kilometers from here is a film crew and a group of experts in a variety of fields whom I have asked to assist me in my investigation--”

“Investigation!” the Headmistress repeated incredulously. “Absolutely and unequivocally out of the question!”

Martin overrode her. “One of those individuals is an agent of the British special police.”

James felt a palpable silence descend over the room at the mention of the Muggle police. He knew from conversations he’d heard between his dad and other Ministry officials that it was one thing to Obliviate a single person or even a contained group, but things could get extremely complicated if any official Muggle investigative bureaus became involved.

“It pays to be owed favors in high places,” Martin went on. “It took quite a lot to get a ranking agent out here, but I am confident that this is the sort of story one calls in large favors for. There is no official charge yet, of course. Merely curiosity, since there is no record of any establishment of this size in the area. The point is this: if they do not receive a phone call from me in the next two hours with directions for how to get their gear onto the grounds, they are to return immediately to the office, retrieve the recording of this conversation and everything that has occurred to me here so far, and broadcast it however they see fit. It may seem preposterous to most people, I grant. A school in a castle in the dead of nowhere teaching kids how to work real magic, wands and all. But your secret will be out, nevertheless. Your students may attend here, in this secret location, but they do sometimes go home, do they not? And I am willing to bet those homes are nowhere near as protected as this. There will be investigations. You will be revealed. One way or another.”

Headmistress McGonagall’s face was as hard and white as a tombstone. She merely stared at the skinny man in the white shirt. Franklyn broke the silence.

“My good sir, you cannot comprehend what you are asking.” He took off his glasses and stepped in front of Martin. “Your plan would undeniably result in the closing down of this school and possibly many others like it. All those present, and many, many more, would lose their livelihoods and educations. More importantly, what you are insisting upon is the re-introduction of the entire magical world into the world of Muggles, whether either is prepared for that or not. And to what end? Not for the betterment of mankind, I expect. No, I suspect that your aspirations are far more... myopic. Please, do think before you continue. There are forces at work here that you do not comprehend, although you may well be acting on behalf of some of them. I sense that you are not a bad man, or at least not yet a *very* bad man. Think, my friend, before you make a choice that will condemn you in the eyes of generations.”

Martin listened to Franklyn’s words, and seemed to actually consider them. Then, as if snapping out of a daze, he said, “You’re Benjamin Franklin, aren’t you?” He grinned and waggled a finger at Franklyn. “I knew you looked familiar! That’s amazing. Look, I know you’re not in a position to discuss this right now, but I have two words for you: exclusive... interview. Think about it, right?”

“Mr. Prescott,” the Headmistress said, her voice stony. “You cannot expect us to make a decision regarding this in a matter of minutes. We simply must discuss this.”

“Indeed,” Neville added. “Even if we do agree to your conditions, you must conduct yourself upon our terms. How that can be of any benefit to us considering the sheer magnitude of what you are undertaking, I do not yet know. But regardless, we must have some time.”

“As I said,” Martin replied, seeming far more comfortable now that he believed he had the upper hand, “you have two hours. Well, ninety-four minutes, actually.”

“Answer me this, Mr. Prescott,” Franklyn said, sighing. “How did you get onto the school grounds? Before we go any further with this charade, we must know that.”

Martin sighed lightly. “Got a chair? It’s rather a story.”

Neville pointedly produced his wand. Never taking his eyes off Martin, he pointed the wand at a wooden chair in the corner and levitated it rather brusquely. The chair shot forward, nearly scooping Martin off his feet. The man plopped gracelessly onto the seat and the chair thunked to the floor.

“Do continue,” Neville said, half sitting on a corner of the Headmistress’ desk. McGonagall settled into her chair, but remained ramrod straight. Franklyn and James continued to stand.

“Well, I first got the letter telling me about this place in September of last year,” Martin said, leaning forward and rubbing his backside while staring angrily at Neville. “The *View* offers a hundred thousand-pound reward for proof of paranormal activity, and the gentleman that wrote the letter seemed to think that this Hogwarts place would offer such proof in spades. Honestly, we get thousands of letters a year from people hoping to collect the reward. They include everything from blurry pictures of tossed pie plates to actual slices of toast with the faces of saints burned onto them. The *View* never actually had any plans to reward the money. They like a nice dash of the inexplicable in the news from time to time, but when it comes to belief, most of them are the most cynical bunch of hardheads imaginable.

“Me, on the other hand, I’m the sort of guy who wants to believe. It wasn’t the tone of the letter that got my attention, though. It was the little item the sender had included in the envelope. A little box containing something called a ‘Chocolate Frog’. I expected it might have some novelty spring-snakes in it, at best, so being a sport, I went ahead and opened it. Sure enough, there was a perfect little chocolate frog inside. I was just about to grab it and take a bite when the thing lifted its head and looked right at me. I just about dropped the box. Next thing I know, the frog leaps straight out of the box and onto my desk. It was a hot day, and the thing had just come in with the post. Good thing, too, cause the little bugger had gotten a little melty. Left little chocolaty frog footprints all over that night’s copy. Three good hops, then the frog just putters out. I was afraid to touch it, but five minutes later, it still hadn’t moved. I had time to determine that it had just been a normal frog covered in chocolate. Some joke. Thing probably had suffocated from the stuff, and from the heat of being in the box. So I went ahead and scooped it back up and sure enough, the thing was just chocolate. Good chocolate, too, I might add.

“I still might’ve forgotten all about it, to tell you the truth. No matter how open-minded a person might think they are, being confronted with something truly inexplicable still tends to shut down the old belief circuits. If it weren’t for those little chocolaty frog footprints on my papers, I might never have mustered the resolve to be here. I kept them in the bottom of my desk, and every time I looked at them, I remembered that little bugger hopping across my desk. I couldn’t get it out of my mind. So I emailed the guy who’d sent it. Nice trick, I told him. Got any more?”

“He emails me back next day and says if I really want to see tricks, I just need to follow the signal he’d send me. Sure enough, the day after that, there’s another package from him. A little one. Contained everything I needed to lock onto the signal here. There was no way those faithless turds in management would equip me with a crew to investigate the origin of a jumping chocolate frog, even if I showed them the froggy footprints. Fortunately, I had some vacation time coming, so I decided to give it a go on my own. A little camping out would do me good. So I packed my own cameras and caught a train.

“Getting into the general vicinity was easy enough, of course. I spent the first night on the other side of the forest, knowing by the signal that I was within a few kilometers of the source. Next day, I was on foot by dawn. I followed the direction I knew I was supposed to go, but sure enough, every time, I’d find myself heading right back out the way I’d come. It never seemed like I’d turned around or even veered off my course. It was as if I had succeeded in getting to the opposite side of the forest, but somehow the planet had turned around right underneath me. I tried using a compass, and it’d tell me I was dead-on as well, until all of a sudden I’d be stepping right back out into my camp and the needle would spin away as if it’d forgotten what it was for.

“This went on for three solid days. I was getting frustrated, I’ll tell you that. But I was also getting determined, because I knew something was trying to keep me out. I wanted to know what. So the next day, I got out my little package and located the coordinates. This time, though, I kept it in front of me the whole time, watching that little flashing dot. Soon enough, the ground seemed to force me away. I’d run into an old creek bed with sides too steep to climb. I’d angle away only to run into a deadfall of trees or a low cliff. Everything seemed to be working to turn me off my course. I pushed on, though. I climbed and scurried. I pushed through thorns and the thickest undergrowth I’ve ever seen. Then, even gravity seemed to be working against me. I kept feeling as if the earth was tilting up beneath me, trying to throw me backwards off it. No such thing was happening, of course, but it was a dreadful sensation nonetheless. I became nauseous and unaccountably dizzy. But I followed my direction, crawling at the last.

“And then, suddenly, the sensations were gone. The forest seemed to snap back to normal, or at least what passes for normal in this neck of the woods. I had made it through. Ten minutes later, I came out for the first time on the edge of the clearing overlooking this very castle. I was stunned, needless to say. But what amazed me far more than the castle was the scene that I very nearly walked into the midst of.

“There, not twenty feet before me, was the largest man I had ever seen. He looked almost like a grizzly bear that’d been taught to walk upright. But then, standing next to him...” For the first time in his story, Martin paused. He swallowed, obviously shaken by the very memory. “There was something so monstrously huge that I at first thought it must be a kind of dinosaur. It had four legs, each the size of a pillar. I raised my eyes and saw that it was, in fact, two creatures standing near each other, and they were both human-shaped. The tallest one’s head was above the treetops. I couldn’t even see its face. I scrambled back into a hiding place, certain they’d heard me, but it seemed not to be so. The smallest one, the one that looked like a walking bear, talked to the other two, and they answered, sort of. Their voices vibrated the ground. Then, to my horror, they turned and headed towards me, into the forest. The largest one’s foot

came down right next to me, shaking the earth like a bomb and leaving a footprint three inches deep. Then they were gone.”

Martin drew a huge sigh, obviously content with his telling of the tale. “And that was when I knew I had found it. The greatest story of my life. Possibly the greatest story of this century.” He looked around as if he expected applause.

“There is one small detail you have failed to explain to my satisfaction,” Headmistress McGonagall said coldly. “This device you mentioned. It was somehow able to point you to this school. I must know what it is and how it works.”

Martin raised his eyebrows, and then chuckled and sat up. “Oh, yes. That. It’s been acting pretty wonky ever since I got here, but at least it maintained the signal. A simple GPS device. Er, please forgive me. You are probably unfamiliar with the term. A global positioning system device. It allows me to locate any point on earth within a meter or so. Very helpful bit of, er, *Muggle* magic, if you will.”

James spoke for the first time since entering the room. “But how did you pinpoint the school? How would that device know where to find it? It’s unplottable. Not on any map.”

Martin turned to look at him, his brow furrowed, apparently uncertain whether he should even deign to answer James. Finally, seeing that everyone else in the room expected him to respond, Martin stood up. “Like I said, I was sent the coordinates. They were provided by someone on the inside. Really, very simple.”

Martin reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled something out. James knew what it was even before he saw it. He had known it somehow even before he’d asked the question. His heart sank as if through the very floor.

Martin flourished a Gamedeck. It was a different color than Ralph’s, but of exactly the same make. He plunked it unceremoniously onto the Headmistress’ desk. “Wireless uplink for online competition, including chat capability. Pretty standard stuff. So anybody here go by the screen name ‘Austramaddux?’”



“You can’t do this to me!” Martin exclaimed as Neville led him unceremoniously into the Room of Requirement, which had arranged itself into a rather quaint turret-top prison cell, complete with a barred

window, a cot, a bowl of water and a crust of bread on a plate. “This is unlawful imprisonment! It’s an outrage!”

“Think of it as field research,” Neville instructed politely. “We have much to discuss, and after your ordeals in the forest, we thought you might like a bit of a breather. Take a load off, friend.”

James, who was standing in the hall behind Neville, couldn’t help smiling a little. Martin saw him, scowled angrily, and made to shove past Neville. Neville whipped out his wand so fast that James barely saw his robes twitch. “I said,” Neville repeated with low emphasis, not quite pointing his wand at Martin, “take a load off. Friend.”

James’ smile faltered. He’d never seen Neville Longbottom so intense. Of course, James knew the stories of how Neville had cut off the head of Voldemort’s snake, Nagini, but that was before James had been born. In all his memory of the man, Neville had been a kindly figure, soft-spoken and a bit clumsy. Now Neville’s wand hand was so immobile and purposeful that it might have been carved out of marble. Martin blinked at Neville, saw something in the man’s posture and the set of his face that he didn’t like, and backed up. The back of his knees struck the cot and he sat down hard. Neville pocketed his wand and stepped back into the hall, pulling the door of the Room of Requirement shut behind him. Martin, seeing the wand put away, immediately jumped up and started to yell again, but his voice was cut off as the door slammed shut.

“You know, we do have dungeons, Madam Headmistress,” Neville said in his normal voice.

Seeing the door closed, Headmistress McGonagall turned on her heel and walked briskly down the corridor as the others followed. “We have some rather antique torture devices as well, Professor Longbottom, but I believe this will suffice for the moment. We only need to hold him until we receive word from the Ministry of Magic about whatever recourse we may or may not have against the dilemma Mr. Prescott has foisted upon us. In the meantime, Mr. Potter, I must ask you: do you know anything about the game device that has apparently led this... *person* into our midst?”

James swallowed as he struggled to keep up the Headmistress’ pace. He opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came. “Er, well...”

Neville touched James on the shoulder as they walked. “We all saw your face turn as pale as the moon when Prescott produced the GameDeck device. You looked almost like you expected it. Is there something you know that might help us, James?”

James decided there was no point in trying to protect Ralph. It wasn’t his fault, anyway. “My friend has one. He’s a first year like me, but he’s Muggle-born. He didn’t know it might be dangerous to have here. None of us did, really. I was surprised it even worked here.”

“He used it to communicate with someone in the Muggle community?” Neville asked quickly.

“No! As far as I know, he never used it at all! As soon as he got here, his housemates saw it and gave him a load of trouble about it. They’re Slytherins, so they were all ragging on him about counterfeit magical devices, about how it was an insult to the purebloods and all that.”

The Headmistress turned a corner, heading back toward her office. “I assume you are speaking of Mr. Deedle? Yes. I am confident enough that he is not at the head of this particular conspiracy, although this device of his might be. Does it perhaps broadcast some sort of signal?”

James shrugged. “You’d be better off asking Ralph about that, or even my other friend, Zane. He seems to know a lot about how these things work. But I don’t think it sends out information on its own. Ralph says somebody else took his GameDeck and used it. Another Slytherin, we think. Zane was able to tell that somebody had spent some time on it, and that they’d used the name Austramaddux. They hadn’t played the game at all, though. They must have just been using it to send information. Probably the coordinates that that guy said he used to locate the school using his GPS thing.”

“You’re quite sure about this, are you, James?” Neville said, following the Headmistress back into her office. “Have you considered that Mr. Deedle might have used this device on school grounds and unwittingly shared information that he shouldn’t have? It is possible that this tale of the stolen GameDeck is a ruse.”

James shook his head firmly. “No way. Not Ralph. It never even occurred to him, or any of us, that the thing might be used to lead people here. He just knew it made his Slytherin mates angry.”

“We’re all forgetting one important thing,” McGonagall said, lowering herself tiredly into her chair. “Even if Mr. Deedle or this unknown borrower of the device did attempt to share information about this school with a Muggle, the Vow of Secrecy would prevent them.”

Professor Franklyn, who had remained in the Headmistress’ office to fiddle with the GameDeck, replaced the device on the desk and stared at it, apparently unable to make anything of it. “How does this vow work, precisely, Madam Headmistress?”

“It’s quite straightforward, Professor. Every student must sign the vow, proclaiming they will not knowingly reveal any information regarding the existence of Hogwarts to any Muggle individual or agency. If they do, the magical properties of the vow will engage, preventing any such communication. This might mean the *Langlock* jinx or any other curse that would disable the individual’s ability to share information. In this case, we might assume that the user of the device might experience a fusing of the fingers or paralysis of the hand, anything that would prevent them from entering any dangerous information into this device.”

Franklyn was thoughtful. “We use a similar means at Alma Aleron. The wording of the vow must be very specific, of course. No loopholes. Still, it does seem apparent that someone was indeed able to use such a device to communicate very specific information about this school. My guess is that each of these gaming devices is equipped with a tracker that corresponds to the global positioning mechanism Mr. Prescott spoke of. Whoever used Mr. Deedle’s device was apparently able to send the geographical coordinates of one GameDeck to another. Mr. Prescott merely needed to enter that information into his GPS device and follow

it very carefully. Despite Mr. Prescott's obvious Muggle nature, this made him a sort of haphazard Secret-Keeper. He can, if he so wishes, share the secret of this school's location with anyone else he wishes. Whether they are able to get past the school's unplottability zone is another question, though. Not everyone is quite as persistent as he is. This might explain why he needs our help to bring in his entourage."

"We cannot allow such a thing to happen, of course," Neville said, looking to the Headmistress.

"I'm not entirely certain we can prevent it," she said heavily. "Our Mr. Prescott is indeed an extremely tenacious individual. He knows enough already to do us great harm. Even if we were to discover the whereabouts of his crew, Obliviate them all and send them back, they would discover the recording that has been made of all Mr. Prescott has seen so far. He would inevitably return, and perhaps next time, it will occur to him to bring live cameras rather than just a telephone. I see no recourse but to allow him to go on with this investigation of his and hope to talk him out of broadcasting it."

Neville shook his head. "I have more confidence that we could talk the merpeople out of living in the lake than that we could convince this sodding twit not to broadcast his prize story."

Franklyn adjusted his tiny glasses and looked at the ceiling. "Of course, there are more, er, *wholesale* methods of dealing with this kind of thing, Madam Headmistress. We could simply place the Imperius Curse upon Mr. Prescott. That way we could arrange for him to send his crew away and even accompany him back to his offices to help him destroy any record of this visit. Once that was accomplished, we could feel free to Obliviate Mr. Prescott with no fear of a repeat performance."

McGonagall sighed. "This is not the sort of decision we are exactly authorized to make, and frankly, I am glad of that. The Ministry of Magic has been notified of the situation and I am assured they will instruct us on the proper course within the hour. I expect to hear from your father directly, Mr. Potter, and at any moment."

As if on cue, a woman's voice spoke up from the fireplace. "Greetings and salutations. This is an official communication of the Ministry of Magic. Can we be assured that this is a secure assembly?"

McGonagall stood and moved around her desk to face the fireplace. "It is. These with me are the only persons on the grounds at present fully aware of what is happening, although by this point, the whole of the school must know that we have a Muggle individual among us. His entry was hardly subtle."

The face in the banked coals of the Headmistress' fireplace looked around at Neville, James, and Professor Franklyn. "I am the undersecretary of Miss Brenda Sacarhina, Co-Chair of the Council of Ambassadorial Relations. Please stand by to be connected." The face vanished.

James saw McGonagall's face tighten just the tiniest bit when the undersecretary mentioned Miss Sacarhina. Only a few seconds passed before the face of the prim woman appeared in the fireplace. "Madam McGonagall, Professors Franklyn and Longbottom, greetings. And young Mr. Potter, of course." An ingratiating smile appeared on Sacarhina's lips when she spoke to James. The smile disappeared almost as

suddenly as it had appeared, as if it was something she could turn on and off like a light. “We have conferred about the situation that has thrust itself upon you and have reached a conclusion. As you may guess, we have prepared contingencies for just such an occurrence. Please tell Mr. Prescott that he may contact his associates. We find that there is no recourse but to allow his investigation to proceed, however, no one other than Mr. Prescott is to be allowed onto Hogwarts grounds until a delegation from the Ministry arrives to oversee them. We will arrive no later than tomorrow evening, at which time, we will assume all negotiations with Mr. Prescott and his crew.”

“Miss Sacarhina,” McGonagall said, “are you suggesting that the Ministry may well allow this man to perform his investigation and broadcast it to the Muggle world?”

“I’m sorry, Madam McGonagall,” Sacarhina said sweetly, “I didn’t mean to imply that, or anything else. You may rest assured that we are prepared to deal with this situation, regardless of the method we choose. I’d hate to burden you with any more detail than you’ve already been forced to deal with.”

The Headmistress’ face became rather pink. “Burden away, Miss Sacarhina, for I can promise you that the future of this school and its students is hardly the sort of detail I’m likely to dismiss.”

Sacarhina laughed lightly. “My dear Minerva, I suspect that the future of Hogwarts, the students, and yourself is as secure as ever. As I mentioned, we have contingencies for such events. The Ministry is prepared.”

“Forgive me, Miss Sacarhina,” Franklyn interjected, taking half a step forward, “but you’d have us believe that the Ministry of Magic has prepared contingencies for a Muggle investigative reporter penetrating the school of Hogwarts on foot with a camera crew at the ready and intentions to broadcast the secrets of the magical world to Muggles worldwide?”

Sacarhina’s indulgent smile tightened. “I’d have you believe, Mr. Franklyn, that the Ministry has prepared emergency response techniques for dealing with a wide variety of confrontations. The specifics do not matter.”

“I beg to disagree, Miss. The specifics of this instance have revealed a rather large security breach that could, at this point, be utilized by virtually anyone. This school can no longer be considered secure until this breach has been addressed.”

“One thing at a time, Professor. We appreciate your concern, but I assure you that we are fully equipped to deal with the matter in its entirety. If, however, you feel that the safety of yourself and your staff are at risk, we could possibly arrange for your early departure. This would cause us great disappointment and be quite a disruption to the school...”

“My concern, Miss Sacarhina,” Franklyn said coolly, removing his glasses, “is for the security of everyone within these walls, and for the security of the magical and Muggle worlds in general.”

“Again with the hyperbole,” Sacarhina smiled. “Please, all of you, put your minds at ease. I, along with Mr. Recreant, will arrive tomorrow evening. We will meet with this Mr. Prescott and I am quite confident--positive, even--that we will reach a mutually amicable arrangement. You needn’t bother yourselves with it any further.”

“What about my dad?” James asked.

Sacarhina blinked, apparently mystified. “Your father, James? Whatever do you mean?”

“Well, don’t you think he ought to be here along with you and Mr. Recreant?”

Sacarhina smiled her ingratiating smile again. “Why, your father is Head of the Auror Department, James. There is no dark magic involved in this unfortunate set of circumstances, so far as we can tell. There’d be no reason to bother him with it.”

“But he’s dealt with this man before,” Neville said. “He and James witnessed him on the Quidditch pitch last year and led the search to try to capture him.”

“And a fine job he did,” Sacarhina said, her smile snapping shut. “That was his duty at the time. This, however, as you cannot fail to realize, is an ambassadorial issue. Harry Potter’s skills may be varied, but ambassadorship is not one of them. Besides, Mr. Potter is currently on assignment and not to be interrupted. We do have, however, specialists in exactly this sort of negotiation. Along with myself and Mr. Recreant, we are arranging for another ambassador to join us. He is an expert in Muggle-magical relations. We expect him to spearhead our dealings with Mr. Prescott and his crew, and we have full confidence that he will serve all parties quite well.”

McGonagall waved her hand dismissively. “What shall we do with Mr. Prescott until your arrival, Miss Sacarhina?”

“Make him comfortable. Allow him to make his telephone call. Other than that, as little as possible.”

“Surely you do not mean for us to allow him free access to the school,” the Headmistress said, as if it were a statement rather than a question.

Sacarhina seemed to shrug in the fireplace. “Whatever harm he might be able to do by observing is surely less than the harm he could do if he brought Muggle legal charges against us. We must, for the moment, treat him as a guest. Besides, it sounds as if he’s seen quite a lot already.”

McGonagall’s face was unreadable. “Very well, then. Good afternoon, Miss Sacarhina. We will look forward to your arrival tomorrow evening.”

Sacarhina smiled again. “Indeed. Until then.”

The face vanished from the fire. The Headmistress reached for her poker and poked studiously at the embers for several seconds, strewing them so that no hint of the face remained. She replaced the poker, turned her back to the fire, and said, “Insufferable bureaucratic poppycock.”

“I’ll be happy to lodge Mr. Prescott in the Alma Aleron quarters,” Franklyn said, putting his glasses back on. “I’d prefer to keep a close eye on him, anyway. I suspect we can keep him busy enough to prevent him causing any more trouble.”

“I don’t like this at all,” Neville said, still looking at the fireplace. “Harry should be here. Prescott himself isn’t a dark wizard, of course, but there is something extremely dodgy about how he got here at all. Somebody led him here, and that person somehow circumvented the Vow of Secrecy. I don’t care what Sacarhina says, I’d feel a lot better with a decent Auror looking into it.”

The Headmistress opened her door. “At this point, it is out of our hands. Professor Franklyn, your idea is as good as any. Let us escort Mr. Prescott to the Alma Aleron quarters. And despite what Miss Sacarhina might believe, I’d prefer for us to arrange for Mr. Prescott to be quite busy for the next twenty-four hours. The less time he has to explore the school, the better. Mr. Potter, please feel free to return to your classes, and although I suspect I cannot ask you not to speak of this to Mr. Walker and Mr. Deedle, I’d be quite happy if you managed not to talk of it to anyone else. *Especially* Ted Lupin or Noah Metzker.”

As James followed the adults out of the office, a quiet voice spoke to him from the wall. “Going to be quite a busy day tomorrow, Potter.”

James stopped and glanced at the portrait of Severus Snape, not entirely sure what he meant. “I guess so. At least for the Headmistress and everybody.”

Snape’s black eyes bored into him. “Answer me truthfully, Potter: are you still laboring under the delusion that Tabitha Corsica is in possession of the Merlin staff?”

“Oh,” James said, “look, say what you want, but it makes sense. We’re going to get it from her, too, one way or another.”

Snape spoke quickly. “Don’t be a fool, Potter. Turn over what you have. Give it to the Headmistress. Surely you see how dangerous it is to keep the robe, especially now.”

James blinked. “Why? What happens now? Does it have something to do with this Prescott fellow?”

Snape stared hopelessly at James. “You *don’t* see it, then,” he sighed. “There is a very good reason why your father, dull as he is, is being kept from accompanying tomorrow’s delegation. There are members of the Progressive Element even within the Ministry, although they do not call themselves by that name. Sacarhina is one of them. Recreant may be as well, although he is not really in charge. Either she is taking full advantage of a very suspicious coincidence or this is all her plan from the beginning.”

“What? What’s her plan?” James asked, lowering his voice and stepping closer to the portrait.

“The details are unimportant. All that matters is that unless you secure the Merlin robe by tomorrow night, all will very likely be lost.”

“But it *is* secure,” James replied. “We captured it already. You know that. We have to get the Merlin staff now.”

“Forget the staff!” Snape hissed angrily. “You are allowing yourself to be manipulated! If I had even the slightest hope that you’d be any better at it than your father was, I’d have taught you Occlumency by now. When I tell you to secure the Merlin robe, I mean you must turn it over to those who know how to bind it, not just hide it. The enemy has the other two relics. The robe *wishes* to be reunited with them. You will not be able to prevent that, Potter. Don’t be the arrogant fool your father was!”

James scowled. “My father was *never* the arrogant fool you think he was, and I’m not either. I don’t have to listen to you. Besides, tomorrow isn’t the alignment of the planets. It’s the next night. Zane told me himself.”

Snape grinned maliciously. “So trusting are you both. Where, pray tell, does Mr. Walker get his information?”

“He’s in Constellations Club,” James replied angrily. “Madame Delacroix’s been using everybody in the club to help her pinpoint the exact timing of the alignment.”

“And did it never occur to you that she might have deliberately altered the information just enough to mislead those too ignorant to notice? She has known the *day* of the alignment for the past year. She only needed help to ascertain the *hour*. Even you have realized that she is involved in the Merlin plot. Do you expect that she would desire dozens of stargazing students to be swarming the grounds on the very night she plans to skulk off to facilitate the return of the most dangerous wizard of all time?”

James felt sheepish. Of course she wouldn’t. He just hadn’t thought of it. He opened his mouth to speak, but could think of nothing to say. Snape went on. “She has misled all of you by exactly one day. The Hall of Elders’ Crossing will not occur Thursday night, but Wednesday. Tomorrow, Potter. You have been duped, and you are being duped still. There is no time for any more delusions of grandeur. You must turn over the robe. If you do not, you will fail and our enemies will succeed in their plan.”

“James?” It was Neville. He poked his head into the Headmistress’ doorway. “We lost you, it seems. Did you forget something?”

James mind was running at full speed. He stared blankly at Neville for a few seconds, and finally gathered himself. “Er, no. No, sorry, I was just... thinking out loud.”

Neville glanced at the portrait of Snape. Snape sighed and crossed his arms. “Go on, Longbottom, and take the boy with you. I’ve no use for him.”

Neville nodded. “Come along, James. You still have time to make your afternoon classes if you hurry. I’ll walk with you and explain your tardiness.”

James followed Neville out of the room, thinking only of what Snape had told him. They had only one day, one day to get the Merlin staff from Tabitha. One day before the Hall of Elders’ Crossing, and it just happened to be the very same day that Sacarhina was coming to deal with Prescott. As he rode down the moving spiral stairs and came out into the corridor below, it occurred to James that Snape was right about one thing: tomorrow was indeed going to be a very busy day.



16. DISASTER OF THE MERLIN STAFF

The next morning, James, Ralph, and Zane entered the Great Hall for breakfast and headed purposefully toward the far end of the Gryffindor table.

“Are you sure about this?” Ralph asked as they crossed the Hall. “We can’t go back after this, you know.”

James pressed his lips together, but didn’t answer. They crowded in with Noah, Ted, and the rest of the Gremlins, all of whom were seated conspicuously in a tight knot.

“Ah, the very man,” Ted announced as James squeezed between him and Sabrina. “We were just taking bets on why you asked all of us to meet you for breakfast. Noah thinks you want to officially join the ranks of the Gremlins, in which case we’ve prepared a series of grueling challenges for you to complete. My favorite is the one where you don Sabrina’s old Yule gown and run through the school singing the Hogwarts tribute as loud as you can. There’s plenty more, although Damien’s challenges tend to involve too many slugs and mustard for my taste.”

James grimaced. “To tell you the truth, the reason I asked to talk to all of you is that Ralph, Zane, and I have something we need to ask of *you*.” To their credit, none of the Gremlins seemed surprised. They simply leaned in a little as they continued to eat. James didn’t exactly know where to begin. He had awoken that morning with the simple realization that, on their own, he, Ralph, and Zane would not succeed in capturing the Merlin staff in one day. They had no plan. The portrait of Snape had been some help, but Snape didn’t even believe that Tabitha Corsica had the staff. So who could they turn to? He acted on his first impulse. He could ask the one group of people in all the school who were experts in the subtle arts of chaos and tomfoolery. It might take too long to explain everything to Ted and his fellow Gremlins, and even if he could, they still might not agree to help, but it was his best, last hope. James sighed hugely and stared at his glass of pumpkin juice. “We need your help to... to *borrow* something.”

“*Borrow* something?” Noah repeated, his mouth full of toast. “What? Money? A cup of sugar? A decent haircut? Doesn’t sound like you need us, exactly.”

“Quiet, Metzker,” Ted said mildly. “What is it you want to ‘borrow’, James?”

James took a deep breath and then simply said it. “Tabitha Corsica’s broom.”

Damien coughed into his juice. All the other Gremlins glanced at James with widened eyes. All except Ted. “Whatever for?” Sabrina asked in a low voice. “Tonight’s the tournament match between Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Is that it? Are you trying to ruin Slytherin’s chances? I admit that there’s something highly suspect about that broom of hers, but cheating doesn’t exactly seem like your style, James.”

“No! It doesn’t have anything to do with the match,” James said, and then faltered. “It’s a lot to explain. And I’m not even allowed to talk about some of it. McGonagall asked me not to.”

“Tell us as much as you can, then,” Petra said.

“All right. Zane, Ralph, help me out. Fill in any bits I miss. It’s going to sound pretty mad, but here goes.” Between the three of them, they explained the entire story of the Merlin conspiracy, from the first glimpse of the shade of Madame Delacroix on the lake to the adventure at the Grotto Keep to Ralph and James’ mysterious confrontation with the creepy dryad demanding the Merlin robe. They had to back up then, and explain how they’d come to capture the robe from Professor Jackson. James was worried that the story had become so fragmented that the Gremlins wouldn’t be able to follow it. Ted listened intently the entire time, simply eating and watching whoever was speaking. The rest of the Gremlins asked clarifying questions and responded with a mixture of skepticism, awe and excitement.

“You’ve been working this whole plot out all year and you’re only now telling us about it?” Damien asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Like I said, McGonagall warned us not to tell anybody about the Grotto Keep,” James said sincerely. “And we were worried that you wouldn’t believe the rest of it, anyway. We had a hard time believing a lot of it ourselves. For a while, at least. So what do you think?”

“I’m confused,” Sabrina said, frowning. “The whole thing seems pretty patched together. It’s one thing to shoot off Weasley fireworks during the debate, but it’s something else entirely to go and steal the broom of one of the most prominent, and frankly, scary witches in the school. That’s thievery, that is.”

“It’s only thievery if what we’re saying isn’t true,” Zane reasoned. “If Tabitha’s broom *is* the Merlin staff, then it isn’t hers, really. I don’t know whose it is, but no matter what, *she* had to have stolen it somehow herself.”

Damien didn’t seem convinced. “Even if she did, we’d be the only ones who knew that. If she hauls us all into the Headmistress’ office claiming we stole her broom, what would we say? It’s all right because she stole the broom herself from somebody, we don’t know who, and besides, the broom is really the magic staff of the most powerful wizard ever, so we were really just doing the world a favor taking it out of Corsica’s hands? *That’ll* fly like a dead owl.”

“Well, why wouldn’t it?” Ralph interjected. “If it’s true, it’s true.”

“And that came from the mouth of a Slytherin,” Noah said, grinning crookedly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ralph said, firming his jaw.

James shook his head. “It’s all right, Ralph. He’s ragging you. The point is, yes, even if it is true, we might not be able to prove it. I won’t tell you we might not get in trouble over this. I can only tell you that if it *is* true, then being hauled to McGonagall’s office and called a thief is the least of our worries. I can’t ask any of you to get involved if you don’t want to. It’s risky. We could all get in loads of trouble. We could even fail despite our best efforts.”

“Now wait a minute,” Noah said, “this is the Gremlins you’re talking about.”

Petra sat up straight and looked around at the group. “The thing is, if James, Zane, and Ralph are wrong, we’ll know by tomorrow. If we did ‘borrow’ Corsica’s broom, we could return it, somehow. Probably anonymously. No harm, no penalty. Everybody will just think it was a Quidditch prank, right? But if this story is true, and the broom really is the Merlin staff, then nobody will be dragging anybody to the Headmistress’ office.”

“Why not?” Sabrina asked, interested.

“Because Tabitha will have bigger fish to fry,” Noah answered thoughtfully. “If she’s part of some big Merlin conspiracy and she fails to come through with the staff, she’ll be in some serious outs with her cronies. People like that don’t tend to be very forgiving, you know. Why, we might never even see her again.”

“One can only hope,” Petra muttered.

Ted stirred. “Look here, all of you. This is all well and good, but as far as I’m concerned, there’s only one thing to decide. Can we trust James? I don’t know Zane and Ralph here all that well, but I grew up with James. He may have sometimes been an obnoxious little squitter, but he’s always been honest. And besides, he’s the son of my godfather. You remember that guy, don’t you? I’m willing to take a little risk for him. Not just because he’s family, but because he’s a Potter. If he says there’s a battle worth fighting, I’m inclined to believe him.”

“Well said, mate,” Noah said gravely, slapping Ted on the back. “And besides, let’s not forget that this does have the fringe benefit of pulling one over on Tabitha Corsica.”

“And perhaps balancing out tonight’s Quidditch match,” Sabrina admitted.

“And maybe we could somehow snatch her broom when she’s nice and high in the air!” Damien grinned nastily.

“That’s what I said!” Zane exclaimed.

“You’re both mad,” Petra said reproachfully. “You’re as bad as she is.”

“We don’t want to *kill* her,” Zane replied in a wounded voice. “We just want to see her drop a few hundred feet in terror. Ridiculously would levitate her at the last moment, just like the Ralphinator did for James. Honestly, you must think we’re monsters.”

“So are we all agreed, then?” Ted asked the group. Everyone nodded and murmured assent.

“That’s wonderful and all,” Ralph said, “but how are we going to do it?”

Ted leaned back and stared up at the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall, stroking his chin. Slowly, he smiled. “Does anyone know what the weather is supposed to be like tonight?”



There was very little that the group needed to do to prepare. After lunch, Sabrina and Noah headed off to the basements to talk to the house-elves. James and Ted, both of whom had an afternoon free period, spent some time in the library studying a collection of gigantic books about Atmospheric and Weather Charms.

“This is Petra’s thing, really,” Ted lamented. “If she wasn’t busy all afternoon with Divination and Runes, we’d be a lot better off.”

James looked over their notes. “Looks like we’ve got what we need, though, doesn’t it?”

“I guess,” Ted replied airily, flipping a few huge pages. A minute later, he looked up at James. “It was really tough for you to ask for help, wasn’t it?”

James glanced at Ted and met his eyes, then looked out a nearby window. “A little, yeah. I didn’t know if I’d be able to explain it. I wasn’t sure any of you would believe it.”

Ted furrowed his brow. “Is that all?” he prodded.

“Well...,” James began, then stopped. He fiddled with his quill. “No, I guess not. It just seemed like... like something I was supposed to do on my own. I mean, with Zane and Ralph’s help, sure. They were along with the whole thing from the start. But still. I kind of figured that, between the three of us, we’d be able to manage. We’d work it out. It felt a little like...” He stopped, realizing what he was about to say, surprised by it.

“Like what?” Ted asked.

James sighed. “Like a failure. Like if the three of us couldn’t do it on our own, we’d failed, somehow.”

“The three of you. Like your dad and Ron and Hermione, you mean.”

James glanced at Ted sharply. “What? No... no,” he said, but suddenly he wasn’t sure.

“I’m just saying,” Ted replied. “It makes sense. That’s how your dad did it. He was a big one for taking on all the responsibilities of the world and not sharing the load with anyone else. He and Ron and Hermione. There were always loads of people around who were ready and willing to help, and sometimes, they did, but not until they’d pretty much forced themselves into the action.” Ted shrugged.

“You sound like Snape,” James said, keeping his voice level. He felt uncomfortably vulnerable all of a sudden.

“Well, maybe Snape’s right, sometimes,” Ted said mildly, “even if he was an oily old humbug most of the time.”

“Yeah, well, blast him,” James said, surprised to feel a prickle of tears. He blinked them away. “He was a load of help, wasn’t he? Sneaking around, working both sides, never making it clear to anybody where his loyalties really lay until it was too late. Can’t really blame my dad for not trusting him, can you? So I don’t trust him either. Maybe my dad did do most stuff with just Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron. That was all he needed, wasn’t it? They won. He’d found two people he could trust with everything. Well, I found

them, too. I've got Ralph and Zane. So maybe I thought I could be as good as Dad. I'm not, though. I needed some help." There was more James meant to say, but he stopped, uncertain if he should continue.

Ted looked at James for a long, thoughtful moment, and then leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Tough thing living in the shadow of your dad, isn't it?" he said. James didn't reply. A moment later, Ted went on. "I never knew my dad. He died right here, on the school grounds. He and Mum both. They were in the Battle of Hogwarts, you know. You'd think that it would be hard to feel resentful of people you never knew, but you can. I resent them for dying. Sometimes, I resent them for being here at all. I mean, what were they thinking? Both of them rushing off into some big battle, leaving their kid at home. You call that responsible? I sure don't." Ted looked out the window as James had done a minute earlier. Then he sighed. "Ah well, most of the time, though, I'm proud of them. Somebody once said, if you don't have something worth dying for, you aren't really living. Mum and Dad had something worth dying for, and they did. I lost them, but I got a legacy out of it. A legacy is worth something, isn't it?" He looked across the table at James again, searching his face. James nodded, unsure what to say. Finally Ted shrugged a little. "The reason I bring it up, though, is my dad, he left me something else."

Ted was quiet for almost a minute, thinking, apparently debating with himself. Finally, he spoke again. "Dad was a werewolf. I guess it's as simple as that. You didn't know that, did you?"

James tried to keep his face from showing it, but he was quite shocked. He knew there had been something secret about Remus Lupin, something that had never been explained to him or even mentioned outright. All James knew for sure was that Lupin had been close friends with Sirius Black, James Potter the First, and a man named Peter Pettigrew that had eventually betrayed them all. James knew that Lupin had come to teach at Hogwarts when his dad was in school, and that Lupin had taught his dad how to summon his Patronus. Whatever the secret of Remus Lupin's past, it couldn't have been anything terribly serious, James had reasoned. He had thought perhaps Ted's father had been in Azkaban for a while or that he had once flirted with the Dark Arts when he was young. It had never crossed James' mind that Remus Lupin might have been a werewolf.

Despite James' attempt to mask his shock, Ted saw it on his face and nodded. "Yeah, quite a secret, that was. Your dad told me the whole story himself a few years back, when I was old enough to understand it. Grandmum never talks about it at all, even now. I think she's afraid. Not so much of what was, but... well, what could be."

James was a little afraid to ask. "What could be, Ted?"

Ted shrugged. "You know how it is with werewolves. There're only two ways to become one. You can get bitten by one or you can be born of one. Of course, nobody really knows exactly what happens when only your mum or dad is a werewolf. Your dad said that my dad was pretty upset when he found out Mum was going to have a baby. He was scared, see? He didn't want the kid to be like him, to grow up an outcast, cursed and hated. He thought he never should've even married my mum, because she wanted babies, but he was afraid to pass on the curse to them. Well, when I was born, I guess everybody breathed a big sigh of

relief. I was normal. I got my mum's Metamorphmagus thing, even. They tell me I was always changing my hair color as a baby. Got no end of laughs about that, Grandmum says. I can still do it today, and a few other things, too. I usually don't, though. Once you get known for stuff like that, it's hard to be known for much else, if you know what I mean. So I guess Dad died feeling a bit better about having me, then. He died knowing I was normal, more or less. I'm glad of that." Ted was staring out the window again. He took a deep breath, and then looked back at James. "Harry told me how your Grandfather James, Sirius Black, and Pettigrew used to run with my dad when he changed, how they'd change into animal forms and accompany him around the countryside under the full moon, protecting him from the world and the world from him. I even started thinking it was all sort of adventurous and romantic, like those dopey Muggles who read those werewolf stories where the werewolves are all handsome and seductive and mysterious. I started almost wishing I *had* got the werewolf thing after all. And then..." Ted stopped and seemed to wrestle with himself for a moment. He lowered his voice and went on. "Well, the thing is, nobody really knows how all this werewolf stuff works, do they? I never gave it a second thought. But then, last year... last year, I started having insomnia. No big deal, right? Except it wasn't any normal insomnia. I couldn't sleep, but not because I wasn't tired, exactly. I was... I was..." He stopped again and leaned back in his chair, staring hard at the wall by the window.

"Hey," James said, feeling nervous and embarrassed, although he didn't quite know why, "you don't have to tell me. Forget it. No problem."

"No," Ted said, returning his gaze to James, "I do need to tell you. As much for me as for you. Because I haven't told anybody else yet, not even Grandmum. I think if I don't tell somebody, I'll go nuts. See, I couldn't sleep because I was so *hungry*. I was starved! I lay there in bed the first time it happened, telling myself that this was just crazy. I'd had a nice big dinner and everything, just like normal. But no matter what I told myself, my stomach just kept telling me it wanted food. And not just anything. It wanted meat. Raw meat. Fresh-off-the-bone meat. You see what I'm getting at?"

James understood. "It was..." he began, and then had to clear his throat. "It was a full moon?"

Ted nodded grimly, slowly. "Eventually, I got to sleep. But since then, it's gotten worse. By the end of last school year, I finally started sneaking down to the kitchens below the Great Hall, where all the elves work. They have a big meat locker down there. I started to... well, you know. I ate. It tends to be a bit of a mess." Ted shuddered, and then seemed to shrug it off. "Anyway, the point is, obviously I didn't completely skip the whole werewolf thing. My dad gave me his own shadow to live in, didn't he? I don't blame him for it. For all I know, this is the worst it'll ever get. And this isn't all that bad. Helps me bulk up for Quidditch season, at least. But... it's scary, a little. I don't know how to manage it yet. And I'm afraid to tell anyone about it. People..." Ted swallowed and looked hard at James. "People don't respond well to werewolves."

James didn't know whether to agree with that or not. Not because it was untrue, but because he wasn't sure Ted needed any more affirmation of it. "My dad could help you, I bet," James said. "And me, too. I'm not afraid of you, Ted, even if you are a werewolf. I've known you my whole life. Maybe we could,

you know, work it out like your dad and his mates did. He had *his* James Potter to help him, and you have yours.”

Ted smiled, and it was a huge, genuine smile. “You’re a brick, James. I’d hate to have to eat you. Learn how to turn yourself into a giant dog, like Sirius did, and maybe being a werewolf wouldn’t be so bad after all, with you trotting along next to me. But I almost forgot why I brought this up at all.” Ted leaned forward again, his eyes serious. “You have the shadow of your dad to grow up in, just like me. But I can’t choose whether I’m like my dad or not. You can. It’s not a curse, James. Your dad’s a great man. Pick the bits of who he is that are worth being like, and be like them, if you want. The other parts, well, that’s your choice, isn’t it? Take it or leave it. Those are the places where you can choose to be even better. Your dad didn’t much ask for help, did he? But that’s not because he didn’t need it. The fact that you asked for help doesn’t tell me you’re worse than him. It tells me you learned something he never learned. That’s you being you, not just a copy of your dad. I think that’s pretty cool, if you ask me. And not just because it means I get to help pull a fast one on Tabitha Corsica.”

James was speechless. He simply stared at Ted, unsure what to feel or think, unsure if what Ted was saying was true or not. He knew only that it surprised him and humbled him, in a good way, to hear Ted say what he had. Ted closed the gigantic book in front of him with a loud clunk.

“Come on,” he said, standing and gathering the books together. “Help me get these to the common room so Petra can look them over before the match. She’s going to have to help me get this right or we’re doomed for sure. Dinner is in an hour, and after that, we’re going to be pretty preoccupied for the rest of the night, if you know what I mean.”



The afternoon of the last Quidditch match of the season was cool and misty, covered with a veil of restless, grey clouds. Silent and unusually somber, the Gremlins trooped through the tunnel behind the statue of St. Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive. When they reached the steps that led up to the interior of the equipment shed, Ted slowed and tiptoed. By now, Ridcully had probably already retrieved the Quidditch trunk from the shed, but it didn’t hurt to be careful. Ted peered around the cramped space, saw only some dusty shelves and a few broken brooms, and then beckoned the rest to follow him up.

“It’s all clear. We should be safe in here, now that Ridcully’s been and gone. He’s the only one that uses the shed.”

Ralph climbed the steps and looked cautiously around. James remembered that Ralph hadn’t been along the night he and the Gremlins had used this secret tunnel to go raise the Wocket. “It’s a magic tunnel. It only works one way,” he whispered to Ralph. “We can get back through it because it’s the way we came, but anybody else would just find the inside of the equipment shed.”

“Cool,” Ralph breathed meaningfully. “That’s good to know.”

James, Ralph, and Sabrina pressed against the rear of the shed to peer through the single, grimy window. The Quidditch pitch lay behind the shed, and they could clearly see three of the grandstands, already mostly filled with banner-waving students and teachers, all bundled against the unseasonable chill. The Ravenclaw and Slytherin teams were gathering along opposite sides of the pitch to observe their captains shaking hands and listen to Ridcully’s traditional recital of the basic rules of play.

“I forgot all about this,” Sabrina said quietly. “The whole handshaking thing. That Zane is a pretty sharp fellow.”

James nodded. It had been Zane’s idea to stage the broom caper during the opening moments of the match, in those few minutes when both teams came out of their holding pens beneath the grandstands to watch the opening ritual. It was a genius idea, because it was the only time when the teams’ brooms were separated from their owners, left behind in the holding pens until the teams collected them for their big flying introductions.

“It’s time,” Ted said, tapping James once on the shoulder. “There’s Corsica already.”

James swallowed past a lump in his throat that felt like a marble. His heart was already pounding. He pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of his backpack, shook it open and threw it over his and Ralph’s heads. As they neared the door of the shed, Petra whispered harshly, “I can see your feet. Ralph, duck down some more.” Ralph hunkered and James saw the edge of the cloak meet the ground around his feet.

“Stay low and move fast,” Ted instructed. He turned and peered between the planks of the door. The equipment shed was positioned at a corner of the pitch, just inside the magical boundary erected by the match official. The door faced away from the pitch, visible only to the Slytherin grandstands right next to it.

“Looks clear enough,” Ted said, his face pressed to the cracks in the door. “Let’s just hope everybody’s looking at the pitch and not this shed.” With that, he pushed the door open and stepped aside. James and Ralph shuffled through and James heard the door clunk shut behind them.

The wind was shifty and unpredictable. It barreled across the pitch and swatted restlessly at the Invisibility Cloak, flapping it about the boys’ legs.

“Somebody’s going to see my feet,” Ralph moaned.

“We’re almost there already,” James said under the noise of the crowd. “Just stay close and keep down.”

Through the transparent fabric of the Invisibility Cloak, James could see the dark mouth of the doorway into the Slytherin holding pen. The great doors were swung wide open, latched to the walls of the grandstand to keep them from blowing shut. The Slytherin players were lined up along the pitch on the other side of the doorway, close enough that a careless word or a flicker of their shoes might be noticed. James held his breath and resisted the urge to run. Slowly, the two boys sidled past the nearest Slytherin player, Tom Squallus, and slipped into the shadow of the doorway. Inside, the wind fell away and the cloak hung still. James let his breath out in a careful hiss.

“Come on,” he whispered almost soundlessly. “We don’t have much time.”

James knew what the Gremlins were planning, even though he wasn’t going to see any of it. Zane, who was watching along with his teammates on the Ravenclaw side of the pitch, told him all about it later. As Tabitha and Gennifer Tellus, the Ravenclaw Captain, walked to meet Ridcully at the centerline of the pitch, a strange sound began to build in the air overhead. All day, the sky had been low and sluggish, packed with grey clouds, but now, as the spectators and players glanced up, the clouds had begun to circle ponderously. There was a bulge in the clouds directly over the pitch, spiraling in on itself and lowering even as the crowd watched. The general noise of the assembly quieted, and the sound of the clouds in that silence was a deep, vibrating groan, long and menacing. With only his eyes, Zane glanced toward the equipment shed at the far corner of the pitch. He could just see the shapes of Ted and Petra, ducked low in the corners of the tiny window, their wands raised, teasing the cloud shapes. He smiled, and then, when the timing was perfect and the entire pitch had fallen silent, he called out across the pitch, “Quidditch is never called on account of weather, right, Gennifer?”

There was a nervous ripple of laughter across the nearer grandstands. Gennifer glanced at Zane for a moment, then looked back up at the funnel lowering over her. As a Gremlin, Ted had told her of their plan, but Zane could tell that her nervousness wasn’t hard to fake. Neither Ridcully nor Tabitha Corsica seemed prepared to move. Corsica merely looked up at the clouds, her hair whipping wildly around her face, her wand visible in her hand. Ridcully’s expression seemed to be one of grim determination.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Damien’s voice echoed throughout the grandstands from his place in the announcer’s booth, “we seem to be experiencing some sort of highly localized weather phenomenon. Please stay in your seats. You are probably safe there. Those on the field, please remain where you are. Cyclones cannot see you if you don’t move.”

In the crowd, someone shouted out, “That’s dinosaurs, you crazy fruitbat!”

“Same concept,” Damien answered in his amplified voice.

Sabrina and Noah darted out of the equipment shed, ducking against the swirling winds. They scurried toward the tiny concessions area built into the base of the Hufflepuff grandstand. The counter was

manned by Hufflepuff students, but the food itself was prepared by elves in a kitchen near the back. Noah and Sabrina headed along the side of the grandstand and stopped at an open doorway.

“Hey, you fellows see what’s going on out here?” Sabrina yelled over the growing noise of the cyclone. “Weather’s getting pretty foul, isn’t it?”

A grumpy looking elf in the back of the kitchen lowered his pipe. “And what do you want we’s to do about it, eh? You wants we should shoot a blast of storm-calming pixie dust out our ears, maybe?”

“I was just thinking about section fifty-five, paragraph nine of the Elves of Hogwarts Coalition Agreement,” Noah yelled, hunkering in the doorway. “Says elves are responsible for securing the grounds during inclement weather. Getting pretty inclement out here, I’d say. Maybe you’d like Sabrina and me to go shut and lock the holding pen doors for you until this blows over? Come on, Sabrina.”

The elf stuffed his pipe into the knot of his napkin lincloth and jumped forward. “Never you mind that, now!” He turned and called into the depths of the kitchen. “Oi! Peckle! Krung! Seedie! We got a job, we does. Let’s get a move on.”

The four elves bustled past Sabrina and Noah. The grumpy elf called back over his shoulder as they went, “Much obliged, master and mistress. Enjoy the match, now.”

As the elves scurried through the wind toward the holding pen doors, the cyclone finally touched the pitch. It licked across the center line, twenty feet to Tabitha Corsica’s right, and for several moments, she watched it, fascinated. Many people commented later that, impressive as it was, it was certainly the smallest cyclone they had ever seen. The grass where it touched down tossed wildly, but the power of the tornado dropped off significantly after a hundred feet or so, so that those in the grandstands were relatively unaffected. Gennifer Tellus turned and ran to the sidelines to join her team. Ridcully didn’t seem to notice. Still standing in the center of the pitch next to him, Tabitha Corsica fingered her wand and glanced around, now ignoring the writhing cyclone. She seemed to be looking for something.

In the holding pen deep beneath the Slytherin grandstands, James and Ralph heard the noise of the cyclone and the creaking of the grandstand as the wind pressed against it.

“Which one is it?” Ralph asked as James whipped the cloak off them. “There’re so many of them!”

James pointed past the row of broomsticks leaning against the lockers. There, in the corner farthest from the door, a broom hung in the air as if awaiting its rider.

“That’s got to be it,” he said, darting toward it. They stopped, one on either side of it. Close up, the broom seemed to be vibrating or humming very slightly. A low, unsettling noise came from it, audible even over the moan of the wind and the creak of the grandstands. “Grab it, then, James. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

James reached out and grabbed the broomstick, but the broom didn't budge. He pulled it, then wrapped both hands around it and yanked. The broom was as immobile as if it had been buried in stone.

"What's the problem?" Ralph moaned, glancing back toward the door. "If we're still in here when they come back..."

"We have the Invisibility Cloak, Ralph. We can hide," James said, but he knew Ralph was right. The holding pen was small and there were no obvious places to get out of the way, even if they couldn't be seen. "The broom's stuck, somehow. I can't move it."

"Well," Ralph replied, gesturing vaguely, "it's a broomstick. Maybe you're supposed to ride it."

James felt a sinking in his stomach. "I can't ride this thing, even if I *could* get it to move."

"Why not?"

"It's not mine! I wasn't all that great on the broom until I got my Thunderstreak, if you recall. We want to capture this thing, not pulverize it into a wall with me on it."

"You've gotten better at it since then!" Ralph insisted. "Even before you got your Thunderstreak, you were getting loads better. Almost as good as Zane. Go on! I'll... I'll hop on the back and throw the cloak over both of us!"

James dropped his hands and rolled his eyes. "Ralph, that's completely crazy."

Suddenly, a resounding boom echoed down the corridor leading to the pitch. It rattled the rafters, showering dust all around. Ralph and James both startled. Ralph's voice was squeaky with fear. "What was that?"

"I don't know," James replied quickly, "but I think we just ran all out of options. Ralph, get ready to hop on."

James swung his leg over the floating, gently humming broomstick and gripped the handle tightly with both hands. Slowly, he settled his weight onto the broomstick, letting it collect him.

A minute earlier, outside, Tabitha Corsica had spied something. Zane saw her gaze stop on the equipment shed. Somehow, she'd known the cyclone was suspicious and had identified the one place someone might hide and cast spells into the magical boundaries of the Quidditch pitch. Zane was prepared to bolt onto the pitch to head her off if she approached the shed. He was already concocting a haphazard plan to pretend to drag her to safety. She didn't approach the shed, though. Zane saw her take one step in that direction, and then glance aside at the elves closing and barring the doorways into the team holding pens. Tabitha turned on her heel and stalked purposely toward the door in the base of the Slytherin grandstands.

Even if Zane ran full out, he'd barely beat her there. He simply had to hope that the elves would stick by their duties, regardless of what Tabitha said.

Noah and Sabrina had followed the elves to the Slytherin holding pen doors, watching from a distance as they swung them shut and threw the locking beam into place. Sabrina saw Tabitha striding across the pitch, her face grim and her wand out.

"Open those doors," Tabitha yelled, her voice firm but calm. She raised her wand hand, pointing it at the closed doorway.

"Very sorry, Miss," the grumpy elf answered, bowing slightly. "Coalition requirements. These doors must remain secure until such time as they can be opened without fear of danger or damage."

"Open them now or stand aside," Tabitha called. She was only thirty feet away from the doorway now, and Sabrina saw the look of murder on Tabitha's face. She'd blast those doors open with her wand and probably crush the poor duty-bound elves to paste between them and the wall. Obviously, Tabitha had guessed what was happening and knew that her broom was in jeopardy.

"Hey, Corsica!" Sabrina shouted, launching herself forward, trying to get between Tabitha and the doors. "You summon this cyclone because you were too proud to forfeit to the Ravenclaws?"

Tabitha's eyes darted toward Sabrina, but her pace didn't change. Her wand hand swung swiftly and locked onto Sabrina, who stopped in her tracks. Noah jumped forward to pull Sabrina back, but he was too late. Neither heard the curse Tabitha spoke, but they both saw the bolt of red light leap from her wand. It struck Sabrina square in the face, throwing her backwards into Noah. Both fell to the ground, their shouts drowned by the roar of the wind and the now yelling, confused crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Damien's voice echoed over the noise, "please let's give a big cheer for Mr. Cabe Ridcully, our beloved Quidditch official, who is currently trying to calm the cyclone with some sort of... well, ritualistic dance, as far as I can tell." Sure enough, Ridcully seemed to be dancing around the tornado as it curled over the pitch, throwing up a thick cloud of grit and dust. He pointed his wand at the funnel, but whenever he seemed to get a good aim at it, the funnel would shift, lunging towards him and forcing him to dance away. The crowd did indeed begin to cheer him, so that very few people noticed what was happening at the base of the Slytherin grandstands.

"Last chance," Tabitha called to the elves guarding the doorway. They both glanced at Sabrina, who was still collapsed atop Noah, her hands covering her face.

"Now listen here, mistress," the grumpy elf began, but he was cut off by the bolt of red light that struck the closed doors. Both elves were thrown aside as the great wooden beam that barred the door exploded with a deafening boom and a shower of splinters. Tabitha hadn't slowed in her approach to the door. She aimed her wand once more, ready to cast the spell that would throw the doors wide open. Then, suddenly, she stopped. She cocked her head, as if listening. Noah, struggling to get out from beneath the

dazed Sabrina, heard it as well. Beneath the sound of the cyclone and the roaring grandstands, there was a sound like a single person yelling, and it was growing louder very quickly.

The doors to the Slytherin holding pen burst open, ripping completely off their hinges as something rocketed through them from inside. Noah had the briefest glimpse of somebody bent low over a broom hurtling past Tabitha Corsica so fast that she was thrown off her feet. She landed in a graceless heap ten feet away. The voice of the screaming rider thinned into distance as the broomstick streaked over the pitch, through the cyclone, and out the other side.

James clung to Tabitha's broomstick as tightly as he could. He'd left Ralph behind, having launched into an instant wild acceleration the moment he'd settled onto the broom. He felt the thundering shock as the broom rocketed through the cyclone, then he opened his eyes and pulled, trying to gain some control over the wildly careening broomstick. The Quidditch pitch wheeled sickeningly beneath him as the broom responded, fighting him, but unable to resist the force of his lean. The Ravenclaw grandstand loomed ahead and James struggled to pull up. He roared over the crowd, which ducked in his wake, hats and banners flying up behind him. Damien was yelling something from the announcer's booth, but James couldn't hear it over the roar of the wind in his ears. He risked a glance behind him, fearing he might have hurt someone. There were no obvious injuries as far as he could see. When he turned forward, he was heading directly toward the Slytherin grandstands again, back the way he'd come. He leaned the opposite direction and pulled as hard as he could, driving the broom into a wild, banking turn. The Slytherin grandstands spun away. With a sense of wild triumph, James realized he was getting some control over the broomstick. He looked ahead to see where his turn was taking him and gasped. He barely had time to duck his head before socking through the open door of the equipment shed.

The broom seemed to move as if it had a mind of its own. It roared through the tunnel beyond the shed and the air of the confined space pressed hard against James' eardrums. When it reached the opening behind the pedestal of St. Lokimagus, it turned so hard, threading into the corridor, that it nearly threw James off.

The sense of speed was staggering as the broomstick careened through the halls. Fortunately, the majority of the school's population was out at the Quidditch pitch for the tournament match, leaving the corridors mostly empty. The broomstick banked and dipped into the chasm of the stairwells. It swooped under and over the staircases as they swung and pivoted, barely missing them, forcing James to duck and hug the broomstick as closely as he could. Peeves was near the bottom of the staircases, apparently drawing mustaches on some of the statuary. James saw him out of the corner of his eye, then, amazingly, Peeves was sitting on the broomstick in front of James, facing him.

"Naughty trickery this is, Potter boy!" Peeves shouted gleefully as the broom shot into a narrow hall of classrooms. "Is we trying to create some friendly competition with dear ol' Peeves? Hee hee!"

Peeves grabbed a passing chandelier and swung around it, leaving James and the broom to plunge on after him. James tried to steer, but it was no use. The broomstick was following its own definite, if maniacal,

course. It banked and dove down a flight of stone stairs into the elf kitchens. Unlike the rest of the school, the kitchens were crowded and bustling, filled with elves cleaning up after the evening meal. The broom darted between gigantic pots, forcing the elves to scramble like tenpins. There was a cacophony of crashing dishes and silverware, the noise of which fell away with horrible speed. The washrooms were next, stifling hot and noisy. The broom rocketed wildly through the machinery of the washers, diving through gigantic cogwheels and under the arms of enormous, chugging pistons. James was horrified to see that the broom, apparently having reached a dead end, was barreling straight toward the stone wall at the end of the room. He was about to throw himself off the broom, hoping to land in one of the copper vats of suds and water, when the broom ticked slightly to the left and angled up. There was a door set into the wall, and James recognized that it was a laundry chute. He gritted his teeth and hugged the broomstick again. The broom shot into the chute, angling upwards so hard that James could barely keep his legs tucked in, and then there was only rushing darkness and pressure.

A pile of laundry met him halfway up the chute and James spluttered as the mass of cloth smothered him. He struggled to shake the clothes free, but couldn't risk letting go of the broomstick. The broom ducked again, and James could tell by the change in pressure and the coolness of the air that it had somehow taken him back outside again. All he could see through the mass of cloth was a faint pattern of flickering light as the broomstick banked and dove. James risked letting go with one hand. He flailed at the clothing wrapped around him, finally grabbing a handful and yanking it as hard as he could. The cloth came free, stunning him with a blurring tableau of light and wind. He had time only to recognize that somehow, incredibly, the broom was taking him back to the Quidditch pitch. The grandstands loomed ahead of him. At the base of the nearest one was a throng of people, many turning toward him, pointing and yelling. Then, with instant finality, the broomstick simply stopped moving. James shot off the end of the broom, and for what seemed like far too long a time, he simply hurtled through the air unsupported. Finally, the ground claimed him with a long, rolling thud. Something in James' left arm popped unpleasantly and when he finally came to a stop, he found himself staring up into a dozen random faces.

"Looks like he'll be all right," one of them said, looking from him to someone standing nearby.

"More than he deserves," another person said angrily, frowning down at him. "Trying to ruin the match by stealing the team captain's broomstick. I never would have thought it."

"It's quite all right, really," another voice said from further off. James moaned and pushed himself up on his left elbow. His right arm was throbbing horribly. Tabitha Corsica stood twenty feet away, surrounded by a crowd of awed spectators. Her broom hung motionless next to her, exactly where it had stopped. She had one hand on it, gripping it easily. "We can surely forgive this kind of first-year enthusiasm, although I myself am rather amazed at the lengths some will go to in the name of Quidditch. Really, James. It's just a game." She smiled at him, showing him all her teeth.

James flopped back into the grass, clutching his right arm next to him. The crowd began to break apart as Ridcully appeared, pushing his way through. The Headmistress and Professors Franklyn and Jackson were right behind him. James heard Tabitha Corsica talking loudly to her teammates as she headed back

toward the pitch. “People think that because it’s Muggle-made, it must be a lesser broom, you see. But the magic of this is stronger than anything you’d find in a standard Thunderstreak, even one with the Extra-Gestural Enhancement option. This broom *knows* who its mistress is. All I had to do was summon it. Mr. Potter could hardly have known that, though. In a way, I feel sorry for him. He was just doing what he knew to do.”

McGonagall squatted down next to James, her face grave and full of consternation. “Really, Potter. I just don’t know quite what to say.”

“Broken ulna, Madam,” Franklyn said, peering at James’ arm through a strange device comprised of different sized lenses and brass rings. He folded it neatly and slipped it into his inner robe pocket. “I’d suggest the hospital wing for now and questions later. We have much more to attend to at the moment.”

“Quite right,” the Headmistress agreed, not taking her gaze from James. “Especially since I expect that Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant will be here within the next few hours. I must say, Potter, I am extremely surprised at you. To attempt something so puerile at such a time.” She stood, brushing herself off. “Very well, then. Mr. Jackson, would you escort Mr. Potter to the hospital wing, please? And if you would be so kind as to instruct Madam Curio that Mr. Potter is to be kept there overnight,” she fixed James with a steely stare as Jackson pulled him to his feet, “I want to know exactly where to find him when I wish to question him. And *no* visitors.”

“Rest assured, Madam Headmistress,” Jackson answered, leading James back toward the castle.

They walked the first five minutes in silence, then, when they entered the courtyard and the noise of the pitch died away, Jackson said, “I haven’t quite pegged you yet, Potter.”

The pain in James’ arm had receded to a dull throb, though it was still rather distracting. “Excuse me, sir?”

“I mean that I haven’t figured you out, yet,” Jackson said in a conversational voice. “You obviously know far more than a boy your age should, and somehow, I don’t think that is merely because you are the son of the Ministry’s Head Auror. First, you attempt to steal my case, and then tonight, you orchestrate this preposterous charade to steal Miss Corsica’s broom. And despite what everyone else might think, Potter,” he glanced aside at James as they entered the main hall, his dark brows lowering, “I know that you did not steal it in order to give the Ravenclaws a better chance in the tournament.”

James cleared his throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jackson wasn’t paying him any attention. “It doesn’t matter, Potter. Whatever you think you know, whatever it is you are up to, after tonight, it won’t matter one iota.”

James’ heart skipped a beat, and then began to pound hard in his chest. “Why?” he asked, his lips strangely numb. “What’s tonight?”

Jackson ignored him. He opened one of the leaded glass doors into the hospital wing and held it for James. The room was long and high, lined with crisply made beds. Madam Curio, who for rather obvious reasons, was not a Quidditch fan, was seated at her desk in the rear corner listening to classical music on her wireless.

“Madam Curio, you probably know Mr. Potter, here,” Jackson said, pressing James toward her. “He has somehow managed to break his arm at the Quidditch match despite the fact that he himself is not actually on either of the teams.”

Madam Curio stood and approached James, shaking her head. “Hooligans. I’ll never understand what it is about that sport that turns otherwise proper individuals into Neanderthals. What do we have here, then?” She lifted James’ arm gingerly, feeling for the break. He hissed through his teeth when she found it. She clucked her tongue. “Nasty fracture, sure enough. Could have been worse, though, I’m sure. We’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

“Also,” Jackson said, “I’ve been instructed by the Headmistress to ask you to keep Mr. Potter here for the evening, Madam.”

Curio didn’t look up from her inspection of James’ arm. “The Skele-Gro will take at least until tomorrow morning to complete its work, anyway. Still, this is minor enough. I might have sent him to his rooms with a splint.”

“The Headmistress wishes to question Mr. Potter, Madam. She desires that he be kept under supervision until then. It seems, I am afraid, that Mr. Potter is suspected to be involved in a very serious plot that could put this school at risk. I shouldn’t say more, but if you chose to post some sentries at the doors to keep visitors out and Mr. Potter in, at least until tomorrow morning, I wouldn’t think that was overdoing it.”

“She didn’t say any such thing!” James exclaimed, but he knew that his protest wouldn’t help. In fact, the louder he protested, the worse it would probably look.

Curio gasped and straightened up. “Does this have anything to do with the intrusion of that horrible man on the premises yesterday? I’ve heard that he’s some sort of Muggle newsperson, and that he’s still here! It does, doesn’t it?” She covered her mouth with her hand and looked from Jackson to James.

“Again, I really shouldn’t say any more, Madam,” Jackson replied. “Besides, Mr. Potter may end up being entirely exonerated. We shall see in time. At any rate.” Jackson looked down at James and there was the faintest suggestion of a smile on one corner of his lips. “Until tomorrow morning, then, James.”

He turned and stalked out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him.



17. NIGHT OF THE RETURNING

To her credit, Madam Curio didn't let Professor Jackson's accusations influence her treatment of James. She examined the fracture for several minutes, poking and pinching, and then carefully splinted it. She fell into a harsh but pedantic diatribe about the woes of Quidditch injuries, but it sounded to James like something she'd said a hundred times before. Her mind was elsewhere, and James didn't need to guess what was preoccupying her. The invasion of Martin Prescott into the school had caused a wave of speculation and anxiety. His identity as a Muggle news reporter, and the fact that he was being kept in the Alma Aleron's quarters had fed a load of rumors. There was a cloud of unease over the entire school, not alleviated by the Headmistress' announcement that Ministry officials were arriving to deal with Mr. Prescott. As Madam Curio measured the Skele-Gro dosage, James caught her glancing at him suspiciously, looking him up and down. *Somebody* had to have let the interloper in, after all. Why not this first-year son of the Head Auror? James knew that some people--those who believed the lies of the Progressive Element--would expect him to pull just such a stunt. Earlier that day, he'd heard a voice from a cluster of students saying, "It makes sense, doesn't it? The whole Auror line is that the Law of Secrecy is our only protection from the supposed Muggle witch-hunters. So what do they do? They allow this guy to sneak in and scare us all into thinking Muggles

are hiding out in the forest, behind every bush with a torch and a pyre, ready to burn us all at the stake. It's preposterous. I say let him do his story. That'll show those Ministry power-mongers what for."

"There," Madam Curio said, straightening. "All finished. You'll feel some tingling and itching overnight as the bone knits. That's perfectly normal. Don't fiddle with the splint. The last thing you'll want is for the bones to knit crookedly. The only fix for that would be for me to re-break the bone and start all over, and we certainly wouldn't want that. Now," she gestured towards the row of beds, "pick whichever you like. I'll see that breakfast is brought to you here in the morning. You may as well make yourself comfortable."

James slung his backpack onto one of the bedside tables and climbed up onto the unusually high bed. It was a very comfortable bed, and for good reason, since all the mattresses in the hospital wing had been infused with Relaxation Charms. The charms, however, had no effect on James' thoughts, which were dark with frustration and anxiety. Professor Jackson had admitted that tonight was a night of ultimate importance. It wasn't simply speculation anymore. And now here James was, stuck for the night in the hospital wing, neatly trapped by Professor Jackson's crafty interpretation of Headmistress McGonagall's instructions. Alone for the first time since the attempted broomstick caper, James felt the full impact of what had happened out on the Quidditch pitch. It had seemed like a crazy plan from the beginning, but no more so than the plan to capture Professor Jackson's briefcase, and *that* had worked, hadn't it? Everything had been a success so far, until now. It was as if an invisible brick wall had suddenly blocked them, halting their progress at the last, ultimate moment. Arguably, the Merlin staff was the most powerful element of the three relics. Even now, Corsica, Jackson, and Delacroix were probably preparing to bring the relics together, unaware that they were missing the robe, but with the two most important relics in their possession.

In spite of his anxieties, James had begun to drift sleepily under the influence of the charmed mattress. Now he sat up, his heart beating hard in his chest. What would happen when Jackson opened his case and found Ralph's dress robes instead of the relic robe of Merlin? The *Visum-ineptio* charm would break, then, wouldn't it? Jackson would see the case for what it was. He'd recognize it, and remember that day in Technomancy class, when James, Ralph, and Zane had used the fake case to trick him. He had thought they'd failed, had even referred to it while taking James to the hospital wing. He would surely realize then that they *hadn't* failed. Jackson was smart. He'd know which of the boys had the real robe. Not Zane or Ralph, but James. The boy he hadn't 'pegged' yet. Would Jackson come to the hospital wing to demand the robe? No, even as James thought it, he knew Jackson wouldn't. He'd go straight to James' trunk in the Gryffindor boys' quarters. He'd probably claim to be searching for clues about James' involvement in the unnamed dangerous plot against Hogwarts. Jackson would surely get James' trunk open, and then he'd retrieve the robe. Everything James, Ralph, and Zane, and even the Gremlins had risked would be in vain. It would indeed be over, and there was nothing James could do about it.

James struck the bedside table with his fist in frustration. Madam Curio, seated at her desk in the corner, gasped and put a hand over her chest. She looked at James, but didn't say anything. James pretended not to see her.

His backpack had slipped sideways when he'd slammed his fist onto the table. Resolutely, he grabbed it and opened it. He took out his parchments and his ink and quill. He knew that, under normal conditions, Madam Curio would never allow a patient to have an open ink bottle on her clean white sheets, but as far as she was concerned, she was harboring a potentially dangerous individual. Best not to provoke him. James bent over the parchment and wrote quickly, awkwardly, with his splinted arm, not even noticing the way his hand smeared the inky wet letters.

Dear Dad,

I'm sorry I took the M. Map and the I. Cloak. I know I shouldn't have, but I needed them, and I thought it was what you would have done, so I hope you aren't too mad. I know I don't stand a chance with Mum, but put in a good word, will you?

The reason I took them is because I've discovered something really sneaky and scary going on here at school. Some of the American teachers are in on it, though not Franklyn. He's cool. Also, the P.E. here is in on it. I don't want to tell you about it in a letter, but even if I am in big trouble with you and Mum, I need you to come. Can you be here tomorrow? Miss Sacarbina says you are on an important job and not to be interrupted, so maybe you can't, but try, OK? It's really important and I need your help.

Love,

James

James folded the parchment and tied it with a bit of twine. He didn't know how he'd send it, but he felt better just having written it. He remembered now that he'd intended to write his dad about the Merlin plot way back when they'd captured the robe, and he berated himself for not doing it then. He'd thought, at the time, that his reasons for not telling his dad were good ones, but now, trapped in the hospital wing on the ultimate night of the Merlin plot, and knowing that, despite everything, Jackson might very possibly capture the relic robe back from him, it seemed foolish and arrogant that he hadn't written his dad about it earlier.

An idea struck James and he dug in his backpack again. A moment later, he held his Weasley brand rubber duck in his hands. It still had Zane's handwriting on the bottom: *Laundry Room!* James dipped his quill and drew a line through that, then, underneath it, he wrote: *hospital wing: send Nobby to the east window.* When he was finished, he gave the duck a sharp squeeze. "Manky barmpot!" it quacked.

In the corner, Madam Curio once again startled and looked accusingly at James. Potential criminal or not, she clearly thought his behavior unaccountably rude.

“Sorry, Madam,” James said, holding up the rubber duck. “It wasn’t me. It was my duck.”

“I see,” she said with obvious disapproval. “Perhaps now would be a good time for me to retire for the evening. You won’t be, er, needing anything, will you?”

James shook his head. “No, Madam. Thanks. My arm feels loads better, anyway.”

“Don’t fiddle with it, like I said, and you’ll be fine by morning, I expect.” She stood and hurried past James toward the leaded-glass doors. Two figures could be seen through the milky glass, and James knew that they were Philia Goyle and Kevin Murdock, both kindly sent by Professor Jackson to watch the doors. Madam Curio unlocked the doors and went out, offering her good-evenings to the sentries. The door clicked shut behind her and James heard the bolt clack into place. He sighed in frustration, and then jumped as his rubber duck quacked a loud insult next to him. He raised it and looked at the bottom. Below his handwriting was a new line of black letters: *open the window: ten minutes.*

James felt a little better. He hadn’t been sure that either Ralph or Zane would be in any position to hear or respond to their ducks. In fact, he’d had no word whatsoever about what had happened to the rest of the Gremlins. He felt cautiously confident that none had been caught, although Ralph’s predicament, left in the middle of the Slytherin holding pens, was probably worse than anyone else’s. Despite that, he figured that even Ralph had gotten out all right. Once everyone had seen James explode out of the holding pen riding Tabitha’s broom, attention had probably focused on his wild ride, and then Tabitha’s summoning of her broomstick, bringing both it and James back to the pitch. Most likely, Ralph had slipped out at that point and returned to the shed, along with the Gremlins.

James watched the clock over Madam Curio’s desk as the minutes ticked away. He struggled with the impulse to go and open the window before the ten minutes had passed. If Madam Curio came back and saw him standing by an open window, she’d suspect treachery even though the window was at least thirty feet above the ground. Finally, as the minute hand ticked into place, announcing eight fifteen, James jumped off the bed. He grabbed the letter from the bedside table and ran lightly toward the far right window. The latch turned easily and James opened the window onto cool, misty night. The sky had finally cleared, revealing a dusting of silvery stars, but there was no sign of Nobby. James leaned over the sill, looking along the ledge, and a monstrous silent shape loomed out of the darkness toward him, blotting out the stars. It fell over him heavily, surrounded him, and yanked him bodily out the window before he had time to shout for help.

The figure squeezed him so that James’ breath whooshed out of him. Far below, a voice called in a loud stage whisper, “Not so hard! You’ll grind his bones, already!” James was amazed to recognize Zane’s voice. The gigantic hand loosened a bit and James saw yards of female giant going past as he was lowered toward the ground.

“Nicely done, Prechka!” Zane called, patting the giant on her shin. She grunted happily and opened her hand, unrolling James onto the ground between her massive feet.

“I thought you were just bringing Nobby!” James gasped, clambering up.

“It was Ted’s idea,” Ralph said, moving out of the shadow of a nearby shrubbery. “He knew you’d want to get out and see to this whole Merlin affair, especially now. He went off to find Grawp the moment you were taken off by Jackson. Grawp found Prechka, who’s tall enough to reach the hospital wing, and we were just trying to figure out how to get you to the window when you ducked at us. Worked out pretty neatly, we thought.”

“I’ll say,” James said, rubbing his ribs with the heel of his left palm. “Good thing she’s left-handed or I’d probably need a whole new dose of Skele-Gro for my arm. She’s got a *grip!* So where is Ted, anyway?”

“House arrest, along with the rest of the Gremlins,” Zane said, shrugging. “McGonagall knew they were involved in the broomstick thieving plot, even if she can’t prove it yet. She probably would have let it slide--she has bigger frogs to dissect with Recreant and Sacarhina here--but Jackson’s idea was to have all the Gremlins out of the way until tomorrow, when the whole thing with this Prescott dude was taken care of. Ted was sent off to the Gryffindor common room the moment he got back from the forest with Grawp. Everybody’s there except Sabrina, who took a pretty ugly Gigantism Curse from Corsica. Her nose is the size of a soccerball. Nothing for it but to sleep it off, apparently. I think we’d have been under guard, too, except that Jackson thinks Ralph’s too dim to be involved in the broomstick plot and I had the perfect alibi, being right there on the field the whole time. So here we are. What’s the plan, James?”

James glanced from Zane to Ralph to Prechka, and then took a deep breath. “Same as before. We need to get out to the Grotto Keep to stop Jackson, Delacroix, and whoever else is involved. We still need to capture the Merlin staff, if we can, and most importantly, we need to escape so we can testify about whoever is involved.”

“Hear, hear,” Ralph agreed.

“But first,” James said, holding up the letter he’d written to his dad, “I need to send this. I should’ve sent it weeks ago, but better late than never. Ted was right. We need help. If we hadn’t asked the Gremlins to help us, I’d still be stuck up there in the hospital wing.”

“If we hadn’t asked the Gremlins to help us, you might not have gotten thrown in there in the first place,” Ralph muttered, but without much feeling.

“Zane,” James said, turning toward him and stuffing the letter into his pocket, “what time is the alignment supposed to happen?”

“Nine fifty-five,” Zane answered. “We’ve only got an hour and a half.”

James nodded. “Meet me at the edge of the forest near the lake in fifteen minutes. Bring Prechka if she’ll come.”

Zane looked up the dark bulk of the giantess. “I don’t think we could get rid of her if we wanted to. She seems to like helping.”

“Excellent. Ralph, you have your wand?”

Ralph produced his ridiculously large wand from his back pocket. The lime-green painted tip glowed eerily in the darkness. “Don’t leave home without it,” he said.

“All right, keep it handy. You’re on guard duty. Try to remember everything we learned in D.A.D.A. and be ready to put it to use. This is it, then. Let’s go.”

James darted through the shadows of the corridors, trying to move both quickly and inconspicuously, which was rather a challenge. He arrived at the portrait hole just as Steven Metzker was coming out.

“James!” Steven said, blinking in surprise. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be...” He stopped, and then glanced around the darkened corridors. “Get inside before anyone sees you.”

“Thanks, Steven,” James said, ducking into the portrait hole.

“Don’t mention it,” Steven replied. “And I really mean that. I never saw you, and you never saw me. Don’t make me regret this.”

“Regret what? Nothing happened.”

Steven stepped into the hall as the portrait of the Fat Lady swung shut on James.

The Gremlins, except for Sabrina, were gathered by the fireplace, looking sulky and agitated. Noah saw James and sat up. “I see Prechka found her man.” The others turned and grinned wickedly.

“What are you doing here?” Ted said, growing serious. “Ralph and Zane just left to get you. It took us half the night to get your stuff sorted out after that disaster at the Quidditch pitch, so it’s getting pretty late. You should be heading out to the island. You want us to come along?”

“No, you’re all in enough trouble. I just came to mail this.” He held up the letter. Ted nodded in approval, sensing who it was for. “I’m meeting Ralph and Zane by the forest in ten minutes.”

“I want to come,” Noah said, standing up. “Corsica cursed Sabrina. I want to return the favor on her behalf.”

James shook his head. “You three have a different job tonight, and it may well involve a curse or two. If Ralph, Zane, and I fail, Jackson or somebody will probably show up here looking for the Merlin robe. You three need to guard it. If anyone comes looking for it, you have to stop them, no matter what. I hate to ask you to do that, but... will you?”

Petra nodded and looked at Noah and Ted. “Not a problem. But as much as we’d all like a chance to plug one of those guys, do try not to fail, won’t you?”

James nodded, and then turned and ran up the stairs to the boys' sleeping quarters. The room was empty and dark but for one candle near the door to the tiny bathroom. Nobby, who hadn't gotten the principle of the Owlery and continued to show up at James' window, was sleeping in his cage.

"Nobby," James whispered urgently, "got a message for you to deliver to Dad. I know it's late, but it's really important." The great bird raised his head from beneath his wing and clicked his beak sleepily. James opened the cage door, letting Nobby hop out onto the ledge of the table. When the note was tied to Nobby's outstretched leg, James opened the window.

"And this time, when you come back, go to the Owlery. Nice as it is to have you around, you're going to get me in even more trouble. All right?"

The owl peered at James with his enormous, inscrutable eyes, then hopped onto the window ledge. With a gust of flapping wings, Nobby launched out into the darkness.

James was about to plunge back down the stairs again when his eye was caught by the dark bulk of his trunk. Was it slightly out of its normal position? He felt a sudden, icy dread. Maybe Jackson had already been for the robe. Perhaps he'd checked his briefcase before heading out to the Grotto Keep, just to be sure, and discovered the trickery. Surely the Gremlins below would have seen Jackson coming and going, but then again, maybe not. As James had realized earlier, Jackson was smart. Maybe he'd disguised himself or maybe he'd asked Madame Delacroix to use her Remote Physio-Apparition skills to simply appear in the boys' sleeping quarters to collect the robe directly. Then again, Ted had mentioned that Zane and Ralph had been there, sorting things out after the Quidditch disaster. James had to know. He hunkered down next to his trunk and produced his wand. The case unlocked at his command, and he riffled through the contents until he found the case buried at the bottom. It was still there, but it was slightly open. James gasped in fear, then felt inside. His fingers found the smooth folds of cloth. He could even smell that haunting smell of leaves and earth and living, breathing winds. He heaved a gigantic sigh of relief.

With the trunk open, James wondered if there was anything he might need for his adventure at the island. He glanced around at the unruly pile of clothes and supplies on the end of his bed. After a moment's consideration, he grabbed the Marauder's Map and the Invisibility Cloak. He clapped the trunk shut, used his wand to lock it, and then, having left his backpack on the table in the hospital wing, he stuffed the map and the cloak into a leather book bag his mum had given him at the beginning of the year. He turned and clumped down the stairs quickly, stopping only to remind Noah, Petra, and Ted about Delacroix's powers.

"Don't worry," Noah said, jumping up and heading for the stairs. "We'll take turns keeping an eye on your trunk. One-hour shifts, right Ted?"

Ted nodded. Satisfied, James ducked through the portrait hole to go meet Ralph and Zane.

Five minutes later, as he came out of the courtyard and onto the grounds, James' eyes were too dazzled from the interior lights to be able to see clearly in the darkness. He felt his way down the slope toward the lake until he heard Zane whistling, apparently trying to sound like a bird. The sound came from

his left, and as James turned toward it, he was finally able to make out the bulk of the giantess standing at the edge of the woods. Zane and Ralph were huddled nearby.

“That was pretty good, wasn’t it?” Zane said, grinning. “I saw that in a James Bond movie. I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“Nice,” James nodded. The cool of the night air settled over him and James felt a wild sense of excitement and fear. This was it. There was no turning back. Even now, his absence from the hospital wing was probably being discovered. There might be trouble tomorrow, but if they failed now, there’d be even worse trouble to come. James glanced up at Prechka. “Will she let us ride on her shoulders? It’s the only way we’ll get there in time.”

Prechka heard him. In answer, she bent down, making the earth shudder as her knees struck the hillside. “Prechka help,” she said, trying to keep the boom out of her voice. “Prechka carry small ones.” She grinned at James and her head, now at his level, was nearly as tall as he was. Zane, Ralph, and James took turns scrambling up her arm and onto the giantess’ great, sloping shoulders. James needed Ralph and Zane to help him up, as his splinted right arm was almost no use to him. When she stood, it was like riding a freight elevator into the treetops. Without a word, she began to lumber into the forest. The upper branches of the trees swept past, occasionally groaning as Prechka pushed them aside like reeds.

“How does she know where she’s going?” James asked in a hushed voice.

Ralph shrugged. “Grawp told her. I don’t know how, but apparently, it’s a giant thing. They just remember where they’ve been and how to get there again. It’s probably how they find each other’s hovels in the mountains. I didn’t understand the language at all, but she seems pretty sure of herself.”

Riding Prechka was an altogether different experience than riding Grawp. Where the he-giant had been careful and delicate, the giantess swayed and thumped, her footsteps shuddering up her body and shaking the boys. James thought it was rather like riding on a gigantic walking metronome. The forest swam past, eerie from this strange, high perspective, as if it were clawing at the sky. After a while, James tugged on the giantess’ burlap tunic. “Stop here, Prechka. We’re close and I don’t want them to hear us coming, if we can avoid it.”

Prechka put out a hand, halting herself against a huge, gnarled oak tree. Carefully, she lowered herself and the boys climbed off her shoulders, sliding down her arm to the ground.

“Wait here, Prechka,” James said into the giantess’ enormous, lumpy face. She nodded slowly, seriously, and then stood again. He could only hope that her understanding of their wishes was better than Grawp’s, who had wandered off in search of food after only a few minutes when he’d brought them out here last year.

“This way,” Zane said, pointing. James could see the glitter of moonlight on water through the trees. As quietly as possible, the boys threaded through the tree trunks and underbrush. Within a few minutes, they

emerged at the perimeter of the lake. The island of the Grotto Keep could be seen further along the edge of the water. It loomed monstrously, grown to gothic, cathedral proportions for its ultimate night. The dragon's head bridge was clearly visible, open wide, both welcoming and threatening at the same time. James heard Ralph gulp. Silently, they made their way toward it.

As they reached the opening onto the bridge, the moon slipped from behind a raft of wispy clouds. The island of the Grotto Keep unveiled fully in that silvery glow. There was virtually no hint of the wild, wooded nature of the island now. The dragon's head bridge was a carefully sculpted horror, yawning open before them. At its throat, the vine encrusted gate was as solid-looking and ornate as wrought iron. James could clearly read the poem inscribed on the doors.

"It's closed," Zane whispered, rather hopefully. "Does that mean anything?"

James shook his head. "I don't know. Come on, let's see if we can get in."

Single file, the three boys tiptoed across the bridge. James, in the lead, saw the bridge's upper jaw open further as they approached the gate. It didn't creak this time. The motion was silent and oily, almost unnoticeable. The gates, however, remained firmly closed. James made to reach for his wand, and then stopped, hissing in pain. He'd forgotten about the splint on his fractured right arm.

"Ralph, you'll have to do it," James said, sidling to the right to let Ralph in front of him. "My wand hand's no use. Besides, you're the spells genius."

"Wh-what am I supposed to do?" Ralph stammered, pulling out his wand.

"Just use the Unlocking Spell."

"Whoa, wait!" Zane said, throwing up a hand. "Last time we tried that, we were almost tree food, remember?"

"That was then," James said reasonably. "The island wasn't ready. Tonight's the night it exists for, I think. It'll let us in this time. Besides, this is Ralph. If anybody can do it, he can."

Zane grimaced, but couldn't offer any argument. He took a step backwards, giving Ralph room. Ralph pointed his wand at the gates nervously, his wand hand shaking. He cleared his throat.

"What is it? I always forget!"

"*Alohomora*," James whispered encouragingly. "Emphasis on the second and fourth syllables. You've done it loads of time. Don't worry."

Ralph stiffened, trying to halt the shivering of his arm. He took a deep breath and, in a tremulous voice, spoke the command.

Immediately the vines twining the gates began to loosen. The letters of the poem dissolved into curls and tendrils, contracting from the wooden shapes of the doors. After a few seconds, the doors swung silently open.

Ralph glanced back at James and Zane, his eyes wide and worried. “Well, it worked, I guess.”

“I’d say so, Ralph,” Zane said, moving forward. The three of them stepped carefully into the darkness beyond the gates.

The inside of the Grotto Keep was circular and mostly empty, surrounded by trees that had grown into the shapes of pillars, supporting a thick, domed ceiling of branches and spring leaves. The floor of the grotto was terraced with stone, forming steps that descended toward the middle. There, in the very center, a round bowl of earth was lit in a beam of bright moonlight that pierced a hole in the center of the domed canopy. The Merlin throne stood in that beam of moonlight, and in front of it, silhouetted against the moonlight, her back to them, was Madame Delacroix.

James felt weak with fear. He froze in place, and only distantly felt Ralph’s hand groping at him, tugging him backwards into the shadow of one of the tree trunk pillars. He stumbled a little, and then dropped down behind the bulk of the tree, next to Ralph and Zane. Carefully, slowly, James peered around the tree-pillar, his eyes wide and his heart thundering.

Delacroix hadn’t moved. Her back was still to them, and she was still staring motionlessly at the throne. The Merlin throne was tall, straight-backed and narrow. It was made of polished wood, but was somehow more delicate than James had expected. The mass of it was formed of carvings of vines and leaves, curling and tangled. The only solid parts were the seat and the center of the backrest. The throne looked as if it had been grown rather than carved, much like the Grotto Keep itself. No one else was visible. Apparently, Delacroix had arrived early. James was wondering how long she’d been standing there, motionless, watching the throne, when there was the sound of someone else’s footsteps behind them, on the dragon’s head bridge. James held his breath, and sensed Ralph and Zane hunkering down as low as they could next to him, hiding among the low underbrush lining the Keep.

A man’s voice spoke a low command in some strange language James didn’t recognize. It sounded both beautiful and frightening. There was the sound of the gate’s vines unfurling again, and then footsteps clacked hollowly on the stone steps of the terraced floor. Professor Jackson moved into view, walking resolutely down into the center of the Grotto Keep behind Madame Delacroix.

“Professor Jackson,” Madame Delacroix said, her heavily accented voice ringing in the stone bowl of the grotto, “you never fail to meet my expectations.” She still hadn’t turned around.

“Nor you mine, Madame. You are early.”

“I was savoring de moment, Theodore. It’s been a long time coming. I’d be tempted to say ‘too long’, if I was a believer in chance. I am not, of course. This is how it was meant to be. I have done what I was meant to do. Even you have performed the role you were preordained to perform.”

“Do you really believe so, Madame?” Jackson asked, stopping several feet behind Delacroix. James noticed that Jackson had his hickory wand in his hand. “I wonder. I, as you know, am neither a believer in chance nor destiny. I am a believer in choices.”

“It matters not what you believe, Theodore, as long as your choices lead to the right ends.”

“I have the robe,” Jackson said flatly, abandoning the pretense of polite conversation. “I have always had it. You will not get it from me. I am here to see to that. I am here to stop you, Madame, despite your best efforts to keep me away.”

James almost gasped. He covered his mouth with his hand, stifling it. Jackson was here to stop her! But how? James felt a cold dread dawning on him. Next to him, Ralph whispered almost silently, “Did he say...”

“Shh!” Zane hissed urgently. “Listen!”

Delacroix was making a strange, rhythmic sound. Her shoulders shook slightly with it, and James realized she was laughing. “My dear, dear Theodore, I have never attempted to thwart you. Why, if I had not allowed a token resistance to your presence on dis trip, you’d have never chosen to come at all. Your stubbornness and suspicious nature are my best tools. And I needed you, Professor. I needed what you had, what you believed so ardently dat you were protecting.”

Jackson stiffened. “Do you believe I was foolish enough to bring the robe with me tonight? Then you are more arrogant than I thought. No, the robe is safe. It is secured with the best hexes and counter-*Accio* charms ever created. I know that, for they were created by me. You shall not find it, of that I am certain.”

But Delacroix was laughing harder. She still hadn’t turned around. The beam of light illuminating the chair seemed to be growing brighter, and James realized it was the accumulated light of the planets. They were moving into place. The time of the Hall of Elders’ Crossing was nearly upon them.

“Oh, Professor, your confidence cheers me. With enemies such as yourself, my success is all the more delicious. Do you think I haven’t known all along dat you guarded the robe of Merlinus in your case at all times? Do you think I was not preparing for de robe to be delivered to me from the moment I first arrived here? I haven’t had to lift so much as a finger, and yet de robe comes to me of its own accord dis very night.”

James had a horrible thought. He remembered that day in Defense Against the Dark Arts, when Jackson had followed Professor Franklyn into the classroom, speaking in low tones. Madame Delacroix had come to the door to tell Jackson his class was waiting. James had glanced down at that moment, and the case had mysteriously come open. Was it possible that Madame Delacroix had caused that to happen, just so that

James would see inside? Had she tried to use him somehow? He remembered Zane and Ralph saying that the capture of the robe had been easy. Somehow *too* easy. He shuddered.

“James,” Ralph whispered urgently, “you didn’t bring the robe with you tonight, did you?”

“Of course not!” James replied. “I’m not crazy!”

Zane leaned in to keep his voice as quiet as possible. “Then what’s in the book bag?”

James felt terror and anger mingling inside him. “The Marauder’s Map and the Invisibility Cloak!”

Ralph reached up and clutched James’ shoulder, turning him so that they were face to face. Ralph’s expression was horrible. “James, you don’t have the Invisibility Cloak!” he rasped, his voice cracking. “I do! You left it with me in the Slytherin holding pen, remember? I used it to escape! It’s in my trunk, back in the Slytherin boys’ quarters!”

James simply stared at Ralph, petrified. Below them, in the center of the Grotto Keep, Madame Delacroix continued to cackle.

“Mr. James Potter,” she called through her laughter, “please feel free to join us. Bring your friends if you so desire.”

James felt rooted to the spot. He wouldn’t go down there, of course. He would run. He knew now that he had the robe of Merlinus in his book bag, that he had been tricked into bringing it along, tricked into thinking it was the Invisibility Cloak. Now was the moment to flee. And yet he didn’t. Ralph pushed him, urging him to go, but Zane, on James’ other side, slowly stood up and pulled out his wand.

“The voodoo queen thinks she’s pretty smart,” he said out loud, stepping around the pillar and pointing his wand at her. “You’re as ugly as you are evil. *Stupefy!*”

James gasped as the bolt of red light shot from Zane’s wand. The curse struck Madame Delacroix directly in the back and James watched for her to collapse unconscious. She didn’t move, however, and James was dismayed to see that the bolt of red light had passed straight through her. It struck the ground near the throne and vanished harmlessly. Delacroix was still laughing as she turned to face Zane.

“Ugly, am I?” Her laughter dried up as her gaze met Zane’s. She was no longer blind or old. It was, in fact, her wraith, the projected version of herself. “Evil? Perhaps, but only as a hobby.” The wraith of Madame Delacroix raised a hand and Zane was lifted from his feet roughly. His wand flew from his hand and he thumped against the tree-pillar, his shoes three feet from the ground. He seemed to be stuck there, as if on a hook. “If I was truly evil, I would kill you now, wouldn’t I?” She grinned at him, and then pivoted, pointing her arm at the place where James hid. “Mr. Potter, please, it is silly of you to fight me. You are, after all, almost my apprentice in dis endeavor. Bring Mr. Deedle with you. Let’s all enjoy the spectacle, shall we?”

Jackson had turned when Zane came forward, watching with a noticeable lack of surprise, his wand still out, but pointed at the floor. Now he looked on as James and Ralph stood jerkily, as if against their will, and began to march down the steps toward the center of the grotto. His eyes met James', his bushy dark brows low and furious. "Stop, Potter," he said quietly, raising his wand halfway, pointing it at the floor in front of James and Ralph. Their feet stopped moving, as if they'd suddenly landed in glue.

"Oh, Theodore, must you prolong dis?" Delacroix sighed. She swung her arm toward him and performed a complicated gesture with her fingers. Jackson's wand flicked out of his hand as if on a string. He grabbed for it, but it darted up and away. Delacroix made another gesture with her hand, and the wand snapped in midair, as if broken over a knee. Jackson's face didn't change, but he slowly lowered his hand, staring hard at the two pieces of his hickory wand. Then he turned back to Delacroix, his face white with fury, and began to pace toward her. Delacroix's hand moved like lightning, darting into the folds of her clothing and coming out with her horrible graperoot wand between her fingers.

"Dis may only be a representation of de real thing," she said playfully, "conjured from the dirt of dis place, just like dis version of myself, but I assure you, Theodore, it is exactly as powerful as I think it is. Don't make me destroy you."

Jackson stopped in his tracks, but his face didn't change. "I can't let you go through with this, Delacroix. You know that."

"Oh, but you already have!" she cackled gleefully. She pointed the wand at Jackson and flicked it. A bolt of ugly orange light shot from it, sending Jackson flying violently backwards. He landed hard on the upper stone steps, grunting in pain. He struggled to get up, and Delacroix rolled her eyes. "Heroes," she said disdainfully, and flicked her wand again. Jackson flew off the ground and rammed against another of the tree-pillars lining the grotto. He hung there, apparently knocked unconscious.

"And now," she said, lazily pointing her wand in the direction of James and Ralph, "please, join me."

The two boys were lifted from the ground and transported down the rest of the steps. They dropped clumsily to their feet in the grassy space at the bottom of the grotto, directly in front of the wraith of Madame Delacroix. Her eyes were emerald green and piercing. "Give me de robe. And please, don't make me harm either of you. I only ask de one time."

The book bag slipped off James' shoulder and struck the ground at his feet. He looked down at it, feeling dazed and completely hopeless. "Please," Delacroix said, and flicked her wand. James fell to his knees as if something extraordinarily heavy had landed on his shoulders. His hand plunged into the bag, clutched the robe, and pulled it out. Ralph struggled to grab it, but he seemed locked in place, unable to move more than a few inches in any direction. "Don't, James!"

"I'm not," he said hopelessly.

Delacroix's eyes sparkled greedily. She reached out a hand and delicately took the robe from James. "Free will is highly overrated," she said airily.

"You won't win," James said angrily. "You don't have all the relics."

Delacroix looked up from the robe, meeting James' eyes with an expression of polite surprise. "Don't I, Mr. Potter?"

"No!" James said, gritting his teeth. "We didn't get the broomstick. Tabitha still has it. I'm not even sure if she knows what it is, but I don't see her bringing it to you now, either way." He hoped he was right as he said it. He didn't see the broomstick anywhere in sight, and Tabitha certainly didn't seem to be present, unless she was hiding, like they had been.

Delacroix laughed lightly, as if James had just made a very witty remark at a party. "Dat was de perfect hiding place, wasn't it, Mr. Potter? And Miss Corsica is such the perfect individual to harbor it for me. Why, it's so perfect, in fact, that you never stood a chance of learning that it was, in fact, a clever lie. Interesting as it may be, Miss Corsica's broomstick is nothing more than a convenient ruse. No, like de robe, de Merlin staff has also found its way to me tonight, regardless of what you might think. It has been cared for very well, in fact."

The rather beautiful wraith of Madame Delacroix turned to Ralph and held out her hand. "Your wand, please, Mr. Deedle."

"N-no," Ralph protested, his voice almost a moan. He tried to back away.

"Don't make me insist, please, Ralph," Delacroix said, raising her own wand toward him.

Ralph's hand jerked up and went to his back pocket. Trembling, he produced his ridiculously huge wand. For the first time, James saw it for what it was. It wasn't just unusually thick, whittled to a point at one end. It was part of something that was, at one time, much larger, worn down with age, but still, as had been repeatedly shown, extremely and inexplicably powerful. Delacroix reached out and, almost daintily, plucked the Merlin staff from Ralph's hand.

"Dere was no point in my risking my own capture by smuggling such a thing onto the grounds. Surely someone would have detected it, had it been in my possession. Thus, I arranged for it to be sold to you and your charming father, Mr. Deedle. I was your salesman, in fact, though in a different guise. I do hope you enjoyed the use of the staff. Quite powerful, wasn't it? Oh, but now I see," she added, turning almost apologetic, "you thought that it was you who was de powerful one, didn't you? I'm so sorry, Mr. Deedle. Did you really think you'd have been allowed to enter the Keep if you hadn't had de staff of Merlin with you? Surely even you can see de humor in dat, can't you? You, a Muggle-born. Please, forgive me." She laughed again, lightly, maliciously.

She turned then, and very carefully began to arrange the relics on the throne. James and Ralph looked at each other miserably, and then James tried to look back at Zane, who was still stuck to the tree-pillar behind them, but the darkness was too thick.

Madame Delacroix stepped back from the throne, breathing in a great, long breath of anticipation. She positioned herself between Ralph and James, as if they were compatriots. “Dere we go. Oh, I am so pleased. I do hate to say it, but everything has worked out exactly as I had planned. Enjoy the spectacle, my young friends. I cannot guarantee dat Merlinus will not destroy you with his arrival, but surely you do not think dat too high a price to pay to observe such a thing.”

“It’ll be worth it if it destroys you, too,” James said through gritted teeth.

“Such venom,” Delacroix replied, smiling. “No wonder you made such a good apprentice.”

The robe of Merlin had been draped across the back of the throne, as if Merlin would simply shrug into it when he appeared. The last bit of Merlin’s staff leaned against the front of the throne. The beam of combined moon and starlight had become very bright, drawing a dim line through the darkness from the hole in the domed ceiling to the center of the grassy area below. The three relics glowed in the shimmering, silvery light. The time of the Hall of Elders’ Crossing had come.

James heard something. He knew Madame Delacroix and Ralph had heard it, too. All three turned their heads, trying to locate the source of the noise. It was low and whispering, coming from all directions at once. It was tremulous and distant, almost like a low note on a hundred far-off flutes, but it was growing louder. Madame Delacroix glanced about, her face a mask of glee, and yet James was sure that, wraith or not, there was a hint of fear on her face as well. She suddenly gripped both boys’ arms in her steely hands. “Look!” she breathed.

Tendrils of mist were pouring in between the pillars of the grotto, bringing the sound with them. James glanced around. The tendrils were seeping in between the branches of the domed ceiling as well. They were as insubstantial as smoke, but moved intelligently, with growing speed. They snaked toward the throne, and there they began to collect. As the tendrils combined, they writhed and collapsed, forming only hazy shapes at first, and then hardening, coming into focus. A line of slightly curved, horizontal bars coalesced in the center of the throne. With an involuntary shudder, James saw that they were the ribs of a skeleton. A spine grew from them, both up and down, connecting to two more shapes, the skull and the pelvis. This, James realized, was an Apparition happening in extreme slow motion. The atoms of Merlin were streaming back together, fighting the collected inertia of the centuries. The sound that accompanied the Apparition was growing both in volume and pitch, rising through the octaves and becoming almost human.

“Hey, voodoo queen,” a voice immediately behind James suddenly said, making all three of them jump. “Dodge this.”

A length of log slammed down onto Delacroix’s head, disintegrating it into a hundred clods of wet dirt. Instantly, the Body-Bind Curse on both James and Ralph fell away. James spun and saw Zane holding

the end of the log, pulling it back out of the mess of Delacroix's wraith, which was struggling to rebuild itself. From the shoulders up, Delacroix seemed to be made entirely of broken dirt, writhing roots and worms. The wraith's hands scrabbled at the ruined neck, trying to push the clods back into shape.

"She forgot about me when Merlin started forming!" Zane shouted, yanking the log free and hoisting it back over his shoulder. "I fell off the pillar and just grabbed the closest heavy thing I could find. Get the robe and the staff!" Zane swung the log like a baseball bat, taking off one of Delacroix's arms at the shoulder. It hit the ground and shattered into a mess of dirt and worms.

James jumped forward and snatched a handful of Merlin's robe, reaching his left hand through the forming shape of the wizard. He pulled, but the robe fought back, struggling to maintain its position. Digging his heels into the soft earth, James yanked as hard as he could. The robe wrung from the back of the throne, coming through the skeletal shape seated on it. The shape gripped the arms of the throne and seemed to scream, bringing the pitch of the haunting drone up another octave. Ralph lunged and grabbed at the staff, which was growing in length even as the figure on the throne gained solidity. He jumped back with it, holding it high over his head.

The wraith of Madame Delacroix seemed caught between trying to reform itself and trying to get the robe and the staff back into place. It waved its remaining arm wildly at Ralph, then clawed at the robe in James' hands. Zane danced behind the wraith, the log held high, then brought it down again, burying it almost waist deep in the disintegrating figure. James glanced toward the Merlin throne and saw that the figure there, which had formed to a full skeleton with ghostly musculature clinging to it like moss, was writhing horribly, beginning to melt again into mist. The sound of Merlin's Apparition had become a keening shriek.

And then, as if out of nowhere, another figure was among them. It resolved from the darkness beyond the Grotto Keep, moving with terrible speed. It was the dryad with the horribly long, blue fingernails, but only just barely. There was something else moving within the shape, as if the dryad was merely a costume. A new voice joined the keening wail of the half formed Merlin.

Master! No! I will not fail you! Your time has come at last!

The figure split somehow, completely abandoning the form of the dryad. It became simply two enormous, black talons. They lunged simultaneously at James and Ralph, snatching the robe and the staff back and sending the two boys sprawling to the stone steps. The talons spun, placing the relics back into their positions, and then retracted, falling into dust, as if exhausted.

The figure on the throne shuddered violently, drawing itself back together, and the tendrils of mist roared toward it, solidifying now with terrible speed. The bones grew muscles, layer upon layer. Organs bloomed inside the chest and abdomen, forming from the veins out. The body filled the robe, and the robe took shape over it. Skin collected on the body like dew, first as a filmy membrane, but thickening, growing ruddy and tan. The fingers clutched the staff, which had grown to a length of six feet, tapered gently at the bottom and with a heavy, knobbed end. Runes ran up and down the staff, pulsing with a faint green light.

The noise of Merlin's return resolved into a long scream, and the wizard finally ran out of breath, his head thrown back, the chords of his neck drawn taut as wire. After a long moment, he drew his first breath in a thousand years, filling his huge chest, and lowered his head.

Master! a ghostly voice cried out. James looked from the figure on the throne to the shape that had resolved out of the awful talons. It was a small man, almost invisible. He panted, his bald head glistening in the faint moonlight. *You have returned! My work is complete! I am released!*

"I have returned," the voice of Merlin agreed. The face was stony, the eyes locked onto the ghost. "But what time is this you have returned me to, Austramaddux?"

Th-the world is made ready for you, Master! the ghost stammered, its voice high and frightened. *I... I waited until the perfect time for your coming! The balance of the magicked and the magicless is ripe for your hand, Master! The time... the time is come!*

Merlin stared at the ghost, utterly unmoving.

Please, Master! Austramaddux screamed, falling to his ghostly knees. *I have watched for centuries! My duty... my duty was more than I could bear! I waited as long as I could. I only helped a little! I found a woman, Master! Her heart was open to me! She shared our goals, so I... I encouraged her! I helped, but only a little! A little!*

Merlin's gaze moved from Austramaddux to the wraith of Madame Delacroix, which had mostly reconstituted itself. It flung itself to its knees, and when it spoke, the voice sounded as if it came through a mouthful of dirt. "I am your servant, Merlinus. I have summoned you to fulfill your destiny, to lead us against de Muggle worms. We are prepared for you. The world is ripe for you."

"This puppet of filth is to be my muse?" Merlin said, his voice low but nearly thundering with intensity. "Let us see her as she is, then, not as she wishes to be seen."

Delacroix straightened herself and began to speak, but nothing came out. Her jaw worked, almost mechanically, and then, chillingly, deep choking sounds began to emerge from her throat. The wraith's hands floated upwards, rising to clutch at the neck, then to scrabble at it, digging in with long fingernails so that strips of muddy flesh began to peel away. The throat bulged, almost like that of a bullfrog, and the wraith suddenly bent at the waist, as if it was going to be sick. Merlin's eyes blazed at the wraith and his staff glowed softly, the runes rippling with their inner light. Finally, violently, Madame Delacroix's wraith heaved and the jaw split wide open, far past its logical limits. Something ripped forth from the yawning, horrible mouth. It poured out onto the ground before it. The wraith's body shrunk as the mess poured from its mouth. It was almost as if the wraith turned inside out, emptying itself out of its own mouth, until all that was left was the thing lying prone on the ground, writhing and awful. It was Madame Delacroix as she really was, somehow transported from her remote place of safety and vomited from her puppet form. She wracked against the floor as if in great pain, her shape emaciated and bony, her eyes blank grey orbs, staring blindly at the ceiling.

“Austramaddux, you have brought me to a dead time,” Merlin said, his low voice filling the grotto like the roar of a thousand deeps. He turned away from the pathetic shape of Madame Delacroix, returning his gaze to the cowering ghost. “The trees have awakened for me, but their voice is nearly mute. Even the earth sleeps the sleep of centuries. You have returned me to suit yourself and yourself alone. You were a faulty servant when I agreed to apprentice you, and I have returned only to realize the depth of that mistake. I discharge you from my service. Begone.”

Merlin raised his free hand and held it, palm out, toward the ghost of Austramaddux. The ghost paled even further and shrank away, raising its hands as if to deflect a blow. *No! No, I was faithful! Please! Do not discharge me! I fulfilled my duty! I was faithful! Nooo!*

The last word elongated and rose in pitch, climbing the scale as the ghost seemed to shrink. For a moment, it assumed the form of the blue dryad, cringing and desperate, then it began to lose its shape entirely. It dwindled, and James saw that it contracted in the same proportion as Merlin’s closing hand, as if the wizard were squeezing Austramaddux in his outstretched fist. The ghost’s last word bled into a wail of horror, diminishing even as the ghost collapsed into a bright, flickering point of light. Merlin squeezed his fist, and then opened his hand with a roll of the fingers. The ghost popped, vanished, leaving only the echo of its final scream.

Finally, as if noticing them for the first time, Merlin turned his attention to James, Ralph, and Zane. James moved forward, not sure what he would do, but knowing in his heart he had to do something. Merlin raised his hand again, this time towards James. James felt the world soften around him, darkening. He fought it, tried to shout out against the descending oblivion, but it was no use. He could fight the power of Merlin as much as a gnat might fight a gale. The world streamed away, funneling down to a point, and at the center of the point was the upraised hand of Merlin, pulling him in. There was an eye in the center of the hand, blue like ice. The eye closed, and Merlin’s voice said one word, a word that seemed to fill the blackness where the world had once been, and that word was ‘sleep’.



18. THE TOWER ASSEMBLY

Dawn was a faint pink line on the rim of the horizon when James opened his eyes. He was lying uncomfortably on the grass at the bottom of the Grotto Keep, and he was cold to the bone. Moaning, he rolled to a sitting position and took stock of his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was that the Merlin throne was gone. There wasn't as much as a depression in the grass where it had stood. The second thing James noticed as he raised his head and looked around was that the Grotto Keep was no longer a magical place. In the absence of the Merlin throne, the island was quickly returning to its wild, random nature. The sense of haunting, gothic architecture was slipping away. Birds sang in the thatch of tree branches overhead.

"Oh-hh," a voice nearby groaned. "Where am I? Somehow, I have the terrible feeling that a cup of coffee and a fireplace is not about to appear before my eyes."

"Zane," James said, getting shakily to his feet. "Are you all right? Where's Ralph?"

"I'm here," Ralph muttered. "I'm just taking inventory of all my bones and major bodily functions. So far, nothing alarming, except that I need a bathroom even more than St. Lokimagus."

James climbed the steps into the gloom of the upper terraces of the grotto. The early morning light was faint and grey, barely making it through the brush and trees of the island. Zane and Ralph were climbing unsteadily to their feet.

"Merlin's gone," James said, looking around. "And I don't see Jackson or Delacroix, either." He stepped over the broken bits of Jackson's wand and shuddered.

"Guess we were wrong about him, weren't we?" Ralph said.

"We were wrong about loads of stuff," James agreed softly.

Zane rubbed his lower back and groaned. "Hey, we didn't do too bad, considering everything. We almost stopped Merlin's return, thanks to a handy length of log and my catlike reflexes." His voice sounded hollow in the flat echo of the grotto, and he fell silent. The three boys found the opening that led out to the dragon's head bridge, hacked through some weeds that had grown up to choke the space, and stumbled out into the dawn. The bridge had partially collapsed, and bore almost no resemblance to the frightening dragon's head anymore. The bank bordering the forest was muddy and wet, covered in morning dew.

"Hey look," Ralph said, pointing. There were tracks in the fresh, slippery mud.

"Looks like two people went that way. Away from the school," Zane said, bending over to study the sloppy markings. "You think one of them was Merlin?"

James shook his head. "No. Merlin wasn't wearing shoes. That looks like Delacroix and Jackson to me. She probably left first, and then he set out after her when he came to. Besides, something about Merlin tells me he doesn't leave tracks unless he makes a point of it."

"I hope Jackson breaks her in half when he catches her," Zane said, but without much passion.

"I hope *she* doesn't break *him*," Ralph replied morosely. "You saw what she did to his wand."

"Don't remind me," James muttered. "I don't want to think about it." He began to walk forward, heading generally into the woods where they'd left Prechka, but with no real destination in mind. He had a terrible suspicion about where Merlin had gone, and he, James, was responsible for that. Twice, Delacroix had called him her apprentice. She had influenced him, somehow, and he'd allowed it. He had played right into her plan, bringing the robe to her. She was right. She hadn't had to lift so much as a finger. True, things hadn't seemed to work out very well for her in the end, but that didn't mean much. A lone, rogue Merlin might be even more dangerous than a Merlin in league with people like the Progressive Element. At least they tried to operate under a guise of respectability. Merlin was from a different time, a more direct and deadly time. A nearly crushing weight of guilt and hopelessness pressed down on James as he plodded forward. Zane and Ralph followed quietly.

Prechka was gone. James wasn't surprised, really. Her footprints were pressed into the dewy earth like dinosaur tracks. Without a word, the boys followed them, shivering and wet with dew. Mist filled the woods, reducing the world to a handful of black trees and dripping bushes. As they walked, the mist grew bright, absorbing the sun, and finally began to burn away. The forest awoke with bird song, and the scampering of unseen creatures in the brush. And then, surprisingly, there were distant voices, calling for them.

"Hey!" Zane said, stopping and listening. "That's Ted!"

"And Sabrina!" Ralph added. "What are they doing out here? Hey! Over here!"

The three boys stopped and called to the two Gremlins, who responded with hoots and hollers. A gigantic shape loomed out of the mist, moving almost delicately through the trees.

"Grawp!" Zane laughed, running to meet the giant.

"Boy, you three look like Inferi leftovers," Ted called down from Grawp's shoulders. "You spent the whole night out here?"

"It's a long story, but yes," Zane called up. "Short version: Merlin's back, the voodoo queen's on the run, and Jackson was a good guy after all. He's after her as we speak, results unknown."

"Is there room up there for three more, Grawp?" Ralph said, shivering. "Only, I think if I have to take one more step, I'll drop dead."

Grawp knelt and the three boys clambered onto his back, crowding in with Sabrina and Ted. Before climbing up, James flexed the fingers and wrist of his right hand. There was no pain, and the bones of his arm seemed sturdy and straight. He stripped off the splint and jammed it carelessly into his pocket.

"How'd you two get out?" James asked Ted when he was crammed in next to him, holding handfuls of Grawp's straw-like hair for support. "I thought all of you were under house arrest."

"That was last night," Ted said simply. "Things have gone pretty crazy at the school since then. Merlin showed up in the middle of the night, and let me tell you, that bloke knows how to make an entrance."

"He rode Prechka right into the courtyard and had her kick the front doors in," Sabrina explained. "He obviously speaks Giant, and he had her really wild. Then he climbs off and just puts her to sleep. She's still there, snoring next to the main entrance like the world's largest pile of laundry."

"We all woke up when we heard the noise of the doors being smashed in," Ted went on. "After that, it was pandemonium. Students running all over the place in their night clothes, trying to figure out what's going on. People were already pretty uptight, what with that Prescott guy still on the grounds and nobody knowing what he's up to. And then here's this bloke who's built like a boulder and dressed like a cross

between a druid and Father Christmas, stalking through the school, putting people to sleep with barely a look, clacking this enormous staff on the floor as he goes, loud enough to echo around the whole place. Then he sees Peeves and the weirdest thing happens!”

“What?” Zane asked hopefully. “Did Peeves blow a raspberry at him and get turned into a floor lamp or something?”

“No,” Sabrina said, “Peeves joined him! He didn’t seem to want to, but he did anyway. Merlin stopped when he saw Peeves, and then he spoke to him. None of us knew what he was saying. It was in some really weird, flowery language. We were worried that Peeves would do something stupid and get us all zapped with that creepy staff, but then Peeves just grins, and it isn’t like any of his normal grins. It’s the kind of grin you see on a house-elf when the master is just as prone to wallop the elf with a frying pan as look at it. A whole lot of teeth and not much humor, you know? And then Peeves swoops down next to the guy. They talk for few seconds in low voices, and then Peeves moves off, slow enough for Merlin to follow. Merlin had a place in mind he wanted to go, I guess, and Peeves took him there.”

“Peeves?” Ralph said incredulously.

“I know,” Ted replied. “It isn’t natural. That’s when we knew we were dealing with somebody really scary. Most of us Gremlins had already guessed he was Merlin, but that proved it.”

“So where’d they go?” James asked in a quiet voice.

“Sylvven Tower,” Sabrina answered. “At least that’s what it used to be called. Nobody uses it for much anymore. Word came down that he was awaiting a ‘parley with the Pendragon’, whatever that means.”

“I don’t like the sound of that one bit,” Zane said.

“Nobody does,” Ted agreed. “Apparently, he thinks that this ‘Pendragon’ is the king or leader. It’s some kind of medieval challenge or something. Anyway, McGonagall gathered the faculty to go and deal with him, and that’s when she realized that both Professor Jackson and Delacroix were gone. Then word comes that you’ve gone missing from the hospital wing, James. Next thing we know, McGonagall is sending *us* off to find the three of you. She was too busy to come herself, but she knew if anybody could sniff you out, we could. She seems to suspect you three might know something about this ‘infernal mess’, as she put it. Suspicious old girl, isn’t she?”

As Ted finished speaking, Grawp finally carried them out of the edge of the forest. The castle shone in the brilliant morning sunlight, its windows sparkling gaily, despite the turmoil within. The Garage of the Alma Alerons was quiet, its door flaps closed and tied shut. James remembered the time difference between the Hogwarts and the Philadelphia side of the Garage, and knew that those on that side would still be fast asleep. When Grawp turned the corner into the courtyard, Ted called for him to lower them to the ground.

“Great job, Grawp!” Sabrina said warmly, patting the giant on his enormous shoulder. “Go take a rest with Prechka, why don’t you?” Grawp grunted agreeably and lumbered over to the she-giant, who was

indeed snoring loudly next to the steps into the castle. The massive wooden doors were hanging from one hinge each, smashed inward and gaping. The Entrance Hall was eerily empty and silent. As they entered, Ralph gasped and grabbed James' arm, pointing. There, lying awkwardly on the floor near the door, were Mr. Recreant and Ms. Sacarhina. Both had their eyes open and were grinning unnaturally at the ceiling. Sacarhina's arm was outstretched, sticking up and looking pasty white in the morning light.

"Are they... d-dead?" Ralph stammered.

Ted lightly kicked Recreant's foot. "Not likely. They're still warm and they're breathing. Just really, really slowly. They were apparently down here in the hall when Merlin arrived. Looks like they tried to greet him and he just zapped them, somehow. He put loads of students to sleep, but these two got some special freezing treatment. Anyway, we pulled them out of the way so people wouldn't trip over them." He shrugged and led them past the two prone figures, into the halls beyond the staircases.

"Where's Sylvven Tower?" James asked as they hurried through the corridors.

"It's the tallest tower in the old part of the castle. Narrowest, too," Ted answered, his voice uncharacteristically somber. "Not used for much anymore except stargazing sometimes. It's too tall and treacherous to climb. Petra says that it was an important part of the castle a long, long time ago. Every castle had one, and it was considered neutral ground, sort of like a universal embassy or something. Meetings between warring nations and kingdoms were held there, with one king on one side and the enemy king on the other. Four advisors were allowed to accompany them, but the rest had to wait below. Occasionally, wars would be decided and ended right there, sometimes with one leader killing the other and throwing the body from the top of the tower for all to see."

James felt his heart sink even lower. "So who's up there with him, then?"

Ted shrugged. "Dunno. We got sent off to find you three while McGonagall was still getting everybody together. I assume she meant to meet him herself. She was looking pretty peaked about it, if you ask me."

The five students walked through a wide, low arch, entering the oldest and least used section of the castle. After several curving, narrow corridors, they finally encountered people. Students were gathered in the corridors, lining the walls and talking in hushed voices. Finally, Ted led them into a round room with a very high ceiling, so high, in fact, that it was invisible in the dark, foggy heights of the tower. The floor was crowded with students, muttering in nervous anticipation. A rickety wooden staircase spiraled up the throat of the tower. After a cursory glance upwards, Ted began to climb the stairs. James, Zane, Ralph, and Sabrina followed.

"McGonagall's up there with... *him*?" Ralph asked. "How, er, *good* is she?"

"She's the Headmistress," Sabrina answered seriously. "She's good."

"I hope so," James said quietly.

They climbed the rest of the way in silence. It took quite a long time, and James was feeling remarkably tired and achy by the time he reached the top. Ralph was wheezing behind him, pulling himself up with both hands on the thick banister. Finally, however, the stairs opened onto a room that filled the top of the tower. It was low, thick with heavy rafters and dust and centuries of owl and pigeon guano. Narrow windows marched around the perimeter of the room, revealing slices of morning sunlight. There were several people present, although none of them appeared to be the Headmistress or Merlin.

“James,” a thick voice said, and a hand fell on his shoulder, “what are you doing here? This is no place for you, I’m afraid.”

“He was summoned, Professor Slughorn,” Sabrina said, following the others into the room. “The Headmistress herself asked us to bring him, as well as Ralph and Zane. They are to go up right away.”

“Up?” Ralph wheezed. “There’s more? This isn’t the top?”

“Ah, Mr. Deedle,” Slughorn said, spying Ralph. “Yes, I am afraid there is, but only a bit more. It is directly above us. Are you quite sure about this, Miss Hildegard? This is hardly the place for children.” James thought Slughorn seemed a bit ruffled that he, Ralph, and Zane might be expected to go up while Slughorn himself was not.

“You were in the room when the Headmistress sent us to find them, Professor,” Ted said, allowing a hint of sternness to creep into his voice.

“So I was,” Slughorn acknowledged, as if the fact proved little.

“Let them proceed, Horace,” Professor Flitwick said from a bench near the window. “If they are summoned, they are summoned. They are hardly any safer with us here if that savage prevails.”

Slughorn stared at James, and then, with an apparent force of will, softened his expression. He turned to Ralph and clapped him stiffly on the shoulder. “Represent us well, Mr. Deedle.”

Ted motioned toward a short stone staircase that protruded through the wooden floor and up to a trapdoor in the ceiling. James, Ralph, and Zane approached and climbed the worn steps slowly. The trapdoor wasn’t locked. James pushed it open and sunlight poured in, blinding him momentarily as he climbed onto the surface above.

It was almost exactly the same size and shape as the Grotto Keep, made almost entirely of stone but for the wooden floor in the center, from which the trapdoor opened. Marble pillars surrounded the space, but there was no roof. The morning sunlight filled the top of the tower, dazzling on the white marble and stone terraces. Merlin sat only a few feet away, facing the three boys as they emerged into the soft wind and warm sunlight. His face was stony and immobile, only his eyes moving to watch them.

“Mr. Potter,” the Headmistress’ voice rang out in the stillness, “Mr. Walker, and Mr. Deedle. Thank you for joining us. Please, find your places on my left. We will come to your tale shortly.”

James turned as Zane lowered the trapdoor closed. McGonagall was seated behind them, across from Merlin. She was dressed in a flame red robe both far graver and more ostentatious than James had ever seen her wear. It made her look both younger and dreadful, like a sort of tyrant queen. The chairs that she and Merlin sat upon were embedded in the stone of the lowest terrace so that both looked at each other across the wooden floor in the center. On McGonagall's left, arranged along the rim of the highest terrace, were four more carven seats, although they were much less ornate. Seated on them were Neville Longbottom, Professor Franklyn, and Harry Potter.

"Dad!" James breathed, a smile of relief and joy surfacing on his face. He ran up the steps toward his father.

"James," Harry said quietly, his face grim, "I was told you had gone missing. You had us very worried. I would have gone after the three of you myself, except that we received word you'd been found only moments after I arrived."

"How did you find out?" Ralph asked, frowning his brow.

Harry allowed a crooked smile and held up a Weasley rubber duck. On the bottom, Ted's handwriting was scrawled: *Found them! Be there straight off!* "This is Petra Morganstern's, but she said they got the idea from you three. Very handy."

"I'm sorry I took the map and your cloak, Dad," James said in a rush. "I know I shouldn't have. I really made a mess of things. Merlin's back and it's all my fault."

Harry darted his eyes meaningfully at the chairs in the center of the space. "Don't be too hard on yourself, my boy. We'll have loads of time to discuss this later. For now, I think we have other matters to attend to."

James turned back toward the Headmistress and Merlin. He'd nearly forgotten about them in the excitement and relief of seeing his dad. "Sure. Sorry." The three boys remained standing along the top terrace, next to Harry, Neville, and Franklyn. James noticed for the first time that the opposite side of the terrace was occupied by a surprising number of birds and creatures, all of which were staring hard at Merlin. There were owls and pigeons, ravens and even a few falcons, all arranged on the ledge of the railing, on the four carven seats, and on the floor of the top two terraces. Sitting incongruously among them, also staring at the bearded man, were a variety of creatures James recognized as house animals. Frogs and rats jostled slightly among the birds. Even Zane's cat, Thumbs, was there, sitting near the front, his black and white nose twitching slightly.

"You were saying, Professor Longbottom?" McGonagall said, her gaze still locked on the huge, unmoving form of Merlin.

Neville stirred and stood. "I simply wish to register my objection to your speaking to this... this intruder, who has violently entered this school with who knows what nefarious purpose in mind, in a

language that we, your long time associates and friends, cannot understand or follow. Between that and your, I must admit, surprising attire... well, surely you must know how this looks to us.”

“I apologize, Mr. Longbottom, and the rest of you,” McGonagall said, finally looking away from Merlin and meeting the eyes of those gathered to her left. “I had forgotten myself. This gentleman comes from a time of formality and ritual. I am meeting him as he expects to be met, in the ceremonial robe of my station. I am afraid that when he first found us, he assumed that all of us, including myself and the faculty, were peasants who had somehow managed to overrun the castle. It was extremely unbecoming in his time for the Pendragon to appear in the sort of colorless sacks that he mistook our robes for. As for the language...”

“I can speak in the language of your servants, if you wish it, Madam Pendragon,” Merlin interrupted in his low, carrying voice. “Although why you deign to speak to them as equals when they should be stropped for such impertinence, I cannot guess.”

McGonagall sighed and closed her eyes. James had the sense that these sorts of misunderstandings had been going on for some time. “These are my associates, not my underlings, sir. This is a different time, as I fear I must keep reminding you. I am not the Pendragon of a kingdom. I am Pendragon only of a tiny portion of land, all of which is within sight of this tower. But yes, please do speak so that all of us may understand.”

“As you wish, Madam,” Merlin answered. “I assume your council is fully present, then?”

“It is. James Potter, Ralph Deedle, Zane Walker,” the Headmistress said, looking at each boy in turn. “This man claims to be Merlinus Ambrosius, returned to the world of men from an age of nothingness, by the combined arrangement of his ghostly apprentice and five other individuals. What can you tell us of this tale?”

James answered, explaining, as well and honestly as he could how the three Merlin relics came to be combined in the island of the Grotto Keep. He was careful to proclaim, to his own shame, how Professor Jackson had meant to protect the robe and keep it from the grotto, foiling Madame Delacroix’s plan, but that James had inadvertently ruined his intentions.

“It was my fault,” he explained miserably. “Ralph and Zane only helped because I talked them into it. I wanted to...,” he paused and swallowed, “I wanted to save the day, I guess. But I ruined everything. I’m sorry.”

McGonagall’s face was calm but unreadable as James finished. He hung his head, but a moment later, he felt his dad’s hand on his shoulder, warm and heavy. He sighed.

Merlin let his gaze sweep over the gathering on and near the benches, then he slowly filled his chest. “Austramaddux’s plan abused the intentions of many, I see, some good and some bad. I assume, however, that after this boy’s testimony, there is no doubt about my identity. Allow me to repeat, then: I have been, it seems, the subject of a very dire campaign of lies and slander. It has apparently become accepted lore that I

was, in my own time, a capricious and dishonorable creature, a man of selfish alliances and endless guile. This is no truer than the litany of virtues embroidered into the history of this Voldemort villain you have described to me. I was no more evil than a storm is evil. I killed only when there was no hope of repentance or slavery. I collected dues only from those who deserved to pay, and even then, a third of my purse went to the poor and the church. I am no horror to be sought after by the pathetic creatures whom you gratuitously call ‘evil’, whose own wickedness is hardly a candle to the torches of iniquity I have observed in my own time.”

“I’ve no doubt you believe that,” McGonagall stated, “but surely you know that the legends of the dark heart of the world’s most powerful wizard began even before you stepped outside of your own time, while you still walked the earth. Many lived in fear of you.”

“Only those whose wickedness or ignorance lent them to that error,” Merlin rumbled. “And even in their case, I would more likely have approached them with the rod instead of the sword.”

“That may be so, Merlinus, but you yourself know that you dabbled in arts that, while technically allowed in your time, were not *very* allowed. You exposed yourself to currents of magic that separated you from the rest of humanity, currents that were, in fact, more than most human beings could touch and remain sane. You were changed by that dabbling. Perhaps even warped by it. Even you must have doubted your own judgment at times. The ambiguous morality of Merlinus Ambrosius was well-known, as was his cavalier attitude towards the lives of the non-magicked. It was legitimately suspected that you might side with those who wished the destruction and subjugation of the Muggle realm. I cannot speak for your own time, but in ours, those who wish war upon the Muggle world are our sworn enemies. Your allegiance must be decided before we can allow you to leave these halls.”

“You dare to challenge the nobility of such as me?” Merlin asked, his voice smooth and calm. “And to suggest that I could not merely wipe you all from the earth with a sweep of my arm if I so wished?”

“I dare to do both, and for good reason,” McGonagall said firmly. “You were of questionable motive in your own time, as even the best historians agree. You remain so in this time. And in regard to your powers, they may be formidable, but even in your time, the current from which you drew your power was waning as the earth was tamed. Don’t pretend that that wasn’t your greatest reason for stepping out of time. You hoped to return to an age when the current of the earth was restored, when your power would once again be uninterrupted and complete. But this is not that time. The current is more parsed than ever. Your power may still be great, and you might indeed defeat those gathered here, but you are by no means unstoppable. Choose carefully with whom you ally in this age, Merlinus.”

Merlin’s face remained as impassive as stone as he stared at the Headmistress. “I have truly returned to a time of darkness if the Pendragon believes that a mere threat of doom might sway the convictions of an honorable wizard. But I see that you are honest in your motive, even if your methods are mean. I have never foresworn allegiance to any whose hearts were turned hard against the non-magicked. I worked to maintain the balance between the magical and Muggle worlds, to keep the scales from tipping one toward the other,

though none would have guessed my true aims. I serviced all, but always with that goal in my heart. Fairness is a myth among a fallen humankind, but equality of struggle can be maintained, even if it is only a pale ghost of true fairness.”

“You speak well, Merlinus,” the Headmistress said, “but you have not stated your purpose plainly. Are you here to overthrow us or to work alongside us?”

For the first time, Merlin’s face showed emotion. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. His beard glistened with what James assumed was some sort of oil. Occasionally, the scent of it, wild and spicy, wafted in the breeze of the tower’s top. “Austramaddux deserved the fate I dealt him, and perhaps a hundredfold, for returning me to this time.” He opened his eyes again, and looked around at the assembly. “I approach a castle of the most solid construction I’ve ever witnessed, filled with glittering eyes of hardened sunlight, and yet I find no sentry, no vanguard, not so much as a servant to fill my bath or demand protocol. You meet me with no recognition of my status and no blessing upon my head, wearing the clothes of jesters and field boys, and yet you are surrounded by tables of plenty, on plates as round and smooth as the planets. The Pendragon herself is not revered or waited upon, but dresses like her minions in shapeless bags of tenting. And then, above all, my honor and allegiance is challenged, when I myself only refrain from demanding tribute out of respect for a foreign age. Truly, my mission has become as dust. There is no age ripe for me.”

“Selfish Austramaddux may have been,” McGonagall agreed, leaning slightly forward, “but it may not be a mistake that you were returned to this time, Merlinus. It was thought that you would lead the rebellion against the Muggle world, but if your claims are true, then you may have been brought here by an even greater providence so that you might aid us in preventing just such a tragedy. Even now, the powers of chaos have set in motion events that will lead to that end. This very day, a man resides among us, a Muggle man. He has been led here by agents of disorder, and he has bypassed our greatest defenses using a form of unmagic called ‘technology’. He has access to an engine called ‘the press’ by which he can make known the secrets of the magical world to the rest of humanity. It is only by maintaining that secret for the past millennium that the balance of powers has existed. If this man and his secret plotters succeed, they will abuse the recombination of the magical and Muggle world. They will plot divisions, seek power, and eventually, they will spawn a war. You, more than anyone, know what the result of such a scheme would be. You must help us. Those who plot chaos are expecting you. Let them eat the fire they intended to turn upon the world, Merlinus. Aid us.”

Merlin sat perfectly still for almost a minute, his beard glistening in the sun. The animals fidgeted slightly, noses twitching and feathers ruffling. Finally, Merlin stood, and it was like watching a mountain rise from its foundation. He moved with slow, massive grace until he was fully erect, his staff held upright next to him, his piercing blue eyes settling on the Headmistress.

“You are correct, Madam,” Merlin said, his voice flat and undeniable. “It was my selfish aim to leave my own age only to find a time when my power would be restored in fullness. Arrogance is my iniquity, and it has undone me. I have returned now only to find my power cut to pieces, far more than it was in my own time. I beg your forgiveness, as a man of honor, but I am both unable and unwilling to rise to the post you

have described for me. This is no longer my world. Perhaps you will prevail without me. Perhaps not. I cannot see any future in this time apart from knowing that the sun will arise tomorrow and travel across the heavens as it has done for the thousand years of my absence. Whether it shines down on war or peace, truth or lies, I know not, but I do know this: it will shine upon a world that knows me not, nor I it. I take my leave of you now, Madam. I bid all of you: fare thee well.”

Merlin raised his arms, holding his staff aloft. As one, the birds on the railings and benches launched from their perches. There was a thunderous sound as hundreds of wings beat the air. When the mass of birds broke apart, streaming from the top of the tower in all directions, there was no sign of Merlin.

James stared hard at the space where the great wizard had been standing. It was over. There was nothing left. Harry turned James around and folded him into his arms. “It’s all right, son,” he said. James didn’t believe anything was all right, but he was glad for the words anyway. He hugged his dad back.



“I wonder if he’s really gone for good,” Neville mused out loud.

“I’ve no doubt he means for us to believe that,” the Headmistress replied, arising from her chair on the tower platform. “But the fact of the matter is that he has nowhere to go. His servant, Austramaddux, has apparently been banished to the netherworld, thus Merlinus has no apprentice in this age to arrange for his reappearance if he should choose to step out of time again. I fear we must assume that Merlinus is with us, for better or worse. Mr. Potter, can he be tracked?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Difficult, but not impossible. He will probably retreat to the protection of the woodlands, where his power is strongest. No doubt, he has many methods of surviving and hiding there, but a wizard of such abilities will always leave a detectable magical wake. I believe we can locate him, given a team of Aurors and enough time. The question is: what do we do with him when we find him?”

“We must secure his intent,” Franklyn said somberly, slowly approaching the chair Merlin had occupied. “Merlinus is a creature of mystery and confusion. Despite his words, I sense that he himself does not trust his own allegiances. Things were much clearer in his time. Did you sense it as well? He is unsure in this age. He doesn’t know who to trust, whose aims most reflect his own. This is made worse by the fact that, as you pointed out, Headmistress, Merlin’s own morality is ambiguous at best. He retreats now in order to examine his own heart as much as to study the factions of this age.”

“Do you really believe that, Professor?” Harry asked.

Franklyn had produced the same brass device he’d used to examine James’ broken arm on the Quidditch pitch. He was peering through it, studying the chair Merlin had occupied. He nodded slowly. “I do. Merlin admitted to us that pride is his greatest weakness. He cannot allow us to see his own lack of surety. But there is no doubt of it. He doesn’t know where he stands in this age because he doesn’t know where he stands in his own heart, and only now does he realize it.”

“That doubt won’t last forever, though,” Neville said, stepping down the terraces toward the wooden floor. “We can hardly sit back and wait until he decides whose side to join. His power may be diminished, but I’d wager he is still unmatched by any single wizard alive today. We have to assume he is with our enemies until he determines he is our ally.”

Harry was shaking his head. “I agree that he may be unsure in this time, but I don’t think he’s evil. Or at least, not willfully evil.”

“What do you mean?” Zane interjected. “He’s been sought after by the most evil wizards for the past thousand years or so, hasn’t he?”

“Not the *most* evil wizards,” McGonagall said pointedly.

“That’s true,” Harry agreed. “Only those who were confused or warped enough to believe their aims were good, somehow. Those who knew their hearts were evil, whose eyes were open to their own wickedness and embraced it, they never sought him. At least, as far as we know.”

“Let us repair to our offices for now,” McGonagall said, sighing. “Our day has barely begun and we already have far more to manage than we rightly know how. Besides, I wish to alleviate myself of this unbearable costume as soon as possible.”

Franklyn heaved the trapdoor open and the group began to file down the steps. The animals that had gathered on the tower platform threaded down as well, scampering and hopping around the groups’ feet. Slughorn and the rest of the professors gathered below greeted them with worried faces and a flurry of questions. Ignoring them, James followed his dad down the spiral steps toward the far distant floor.

“How’d you get here so fast, Dad?” he asked. “Merlin didn’t get here until the middle of the night. How’d McGonagall get hold of you so quickly?”

“It wasn’t the Headmistress that brought me here, James,” Harry replied, glancing over his shoulder at his son. “It was your letter. Nobby delivered it this morning, and I came as soon as I read it. The Headmistress was as surprised as anyone when I showed up in her office fireplace.”

“But Sacarhina said you were off on some special assignment and weren’t to be bothered!”

Harry laughed humorlessly. "It was that detail in your letter that proved I needed to get here right away, James. I'm doing nothing but desk work this week. If Sacarhina says I'm on assignment, that's just because she wants to make sure I'm *not here*."

"Yeah," James nodded. "The portrait of Snape told us Sacarhina and Recreant are both no good. They're in on all this Progressive Element stuff."

Harry stopped on the stairs, turning back to James, Ralph, and Zane. "Be careful who you mention that to," he said, lowering his voice. "The Ministry is riddled with people like Recreant and Sacarhina these days, although for most of them, it's just a way to appear a little daring and trendy. Hermione does what she can to fight the propaganda and weed out the instigators, but it's complicated. Recreant is only a tool, but Sacarhina is dangerous. I think she's the mastermind behind the return of Merlin, in fact."

"What?" James said, dropping his voice to match his dad's. "That can't be. It was Madame Delacroix in the grotto last night."

"Yeah, Sacarhina didn't even arrive until yesterday evening," Zane added.

Harry's expression was grave. "Sacarhina isn't the kind of person to get her hands dirty with any of the actual work. She needed Delacroix for that, and Delacroix herself couldn't have gotten the Merlin throne out of the Ministry without Sacarhina on the inside, helping her. Recreant and Sacarhina are only here now because they claim to be escorting an 'expert in Muggle-magical relations' to deal with this Prescott person. There is no such expert. They were expecting to produce Merlin himself, and pass him off as that expert."

"So they never *intended* to stop Prescott from revealing the magical world to the Muggle press!" Ralph said, his face white. "Sacarhina and Merlin were supposed to work together to make *sure* Prescott got his story out, weren't they?"

Harry nodded. "That's what I think. This is all no coincidence. It's exactly the sort of thing people like Sacarhina have been hoping for all along. The recombination of the Muggle and magical world is essential to their final plan for all-out war."

"But Merlin turned out to be on nobody's side but his own, after all," James said. "Does that ruin their plan?"

"I don't know," Harry sighed. "Things have been put in motion that will be very hard to stop now. Sacarhina may no longer need Merlin for this part of the plan."

Zane asked, "So how are you planning to stop Prescott?"

"Stop him? I'm not even supposed to be here, remember? Sacarhina is in charge."

"But she's evil!" James exclaimed. "You can't just let her run the show!"

“We won’t, James,” Harry said, putting a hand on James’ shoulder, but hardening his voice. “But we have to be very careful. Sacarhina has a lot of influence in the Ministry. I can’t just defy her. She’s *hoping* that I’ll do something rash, something she can use against me. She wants the Auror Department shut down entirely. Keeping that from happening is of utmost importance. Even more so than protecting the secrecy of the magical world.”

“So Sacarhina and Delacroix win?” James said, looking his dad in the eye.

“In the short run, perhaps. But don’t lose hope, any of you. Neville, the Headmistress, and I have a few tricks up our sleeves. We will survive the day, no matter what happens with Prescott. The only question now is who led him here in the first place?”

“Well, it would’ve been Sacarhina, wouldn’t it?” Zane suggested.

“No, couldn’t be,” James sighed. “She’s signed the Vow of Secrecy, just like every other witch and wizard. If she’d tried to tell Prescott anything, even through a letter, the vow would have stopped her somehow. Besides, she wouldn’t know anything about how a GameDeck worked or how it could be used to lead somebody to Hogwarts.”

Voices and footsteps echoed from the spiral of stairs above them. The Headmistress and the professors were descending behind them. Harry gestured for the boys to follow him the rest of the way down.

“That’s the only part of this that really baffles me,” Harry said as he tromped down the stairs. “Every witch and wizard is bound by the Vow of Secrecy. Any Muggle parent of a student is bound by their own contract of non-disclosure. That means no one who knows about the magical world would be capable of spreading the secret. And yet someone obviously did. I intend to find out who.”

By the time they neared the last curve of the staircase, the Headmistress, Neville, and the rest of the professors had caught up to them. McGonagall called down to the students who were waiting below.

“Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, we are all returning to you whole and well.” She stopped and regarded the assembly from above. “In order to dispel rumors and quell any fears, I intend to be quite forthright about what has been, and still is, occurring here today. Two men have found their ways rather unexpectedly into these halls over the course of the last two days. The first is still here. His name is Martin Prescott and he is a Muggle. His intentions are quite questionable, but I can assure you that we, your faculty, are prepared to--”

“Thank you, Minerva,” a high, ringing voice interrupted. “I have, in fact, already briefed the students on today’s events. I appreciate your thoroughness, however. Do join us, won’t you?” Sacarhina and Recreant stepped out of the crowd of students and moved to the head of the staircase. Sacarhina’s smile was large and glinting in the dusty light of the tower floor. McGonagall stared down at her for a long moment, and then turned to address the students again. “In that case, I expect you all have classes to attend to. Your

professors shall kindly lead you to your classrooms. Let us make what we can with the rest of the day, shall we?”

“Do you really believe it is necessary for classes to go forward today, Minerva?” Sacarhina said when the Headmistress and the rest of the troupe reached the bottom of the steps. “This is rather an unusual day.”

“Unusual days are the best days for classes, Miss Sacarhina,” McGonagall replied, stepping past the woman. “Reminds everyone why we are here in the first place. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Harry,” Mr. Recreant said, smiling a bit too enthusiastically. “I admit, Brenda and I hadn’t expected to see you here today. Family occasion, is it?” He turned his grin on James, and then flashed it over Ralph and Zane as well.

Harry smiled stiffly. “I’m equally surprised to see the two of you here. I didn’t see any paperwork about a return trip to meet with the Alma Alerons. And I’ve been doing an awful lot of paperwork, as you know.”

Sacarhina took Harry’s arm, and he allowed her to lead him out of the tower, following the last of the students. “Very unexpected, this is,” she said in a confidential tone of voice. “Dreadful situation. Surely Minerva told you about it? Martin Prescott, a Muggle reporter, right here on the grounds. Still, the Ministry feels it is inevitable, really.”

“Does it?” Harry said, stopping near the door and facing Sacarhina. “So Loquacious Knapp knows about this?”

“The Minister is aware of the general direction events have been leading,” Recreant interjected. “We hadn’t chosen to bother him with the particulars, per se.”

“So he doesn’t, in fact, know you are here?” Harry said, dropping his thin smile.

“Harry,” Sacarhina said silkily, “the fact is that this sort of scenario is exactly the purview of the Department of Ambassadorial Relations. You, of course, do not require the signature of the Minister for every little maneuver of the Auror Department. Nor do we require his approval when dealing with the execution of *our* daily duties. Do you intend to stay for the day?”

“I believe so, Brenda,” Harry answered calmly. “I am curious to see what the Department of Ambassadorial Relations does to execute its daily duties in such a situation. Besides, surely you’d agree that an outside, *objective* witness might prove helpful in case of any... inquiries?”

“Suit yourself, Mr. Potter,” Sacarhina said, her smile snapping shut like a jewelry box. “It will all be over by four o’clock this afternoon. Prescott’s crew will arrive and they will get their tour. There is hardly any way to prevent it, after all, considering Mr. Prescott’s very ingenious fail-safes. You may accompany us, but please do not attempt to interfere. It would not go well for you. But I am sure I do not need to tell you that, do I?”

“Did you have a nice snooze down there by the front doors?” Zane said lightly as Sacarhina turned away. She stopped, and then very slowly turned back toward Zane.

“Whatever could you mean, young man?” she asked. Harry was looking at Zane with a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

Zane went on, “You two were both down there to meet Merlin when he made his grand entrance last night, but he was apparently looking for bigger fish than you, wasn’t he? He gave you both the old evil eye and froze you on the spot. Come on, now, that’s gotta *hurt*.”

Sacarhina’s smile eased back onto her face, as if it was the default expression at times when her brain was working hard on something else. Her eyes moved back to Harry. “I simply don’t know what you’ve been filling these poor children’s heads with, Mr. Potter, but it really doesn’t do for Ministry officials to tell such stories. Merlin, of all things.” She shook her head vaguely, then turned and walked through the archway with Mr. Recreant following nervously.

“You sure have a way with people, Zane,” Harry said, grinning and ruffling the boy’s hair.

“My dad says it’s a gift,” Zane agreed. “My mom says it’s a curse. Who can tell?”

“It looked like Miss Sacarhina was more confused than angry,” Ralph mused as they walked through the archway, leaving the Sylvven Tower.

“Could be,” Harry replied. “It might be that everyone Merlin put to sleep forgot about him as well. She may have no recollection of his coming last night.”

“So she still expects him to show up when she takes Prescott and his crew on the grand tour?”

“Perhaps. Although it won’t trip her up for long when he doesn’t show. Merlin’s probably halfway across the Forbidden Forest by now, getting directions from the tree sprites, now that they’re apparently awakened.”

James stopped in the middle of the corridor. A few paces later, Harry stopped as well and turned to look back at his son. James’ face was wide-eyed and thoughtful. Suddenly, he blinked and looked at his dad.

“I need to go to the Forbidden Forest,” he said. “It’s not too late. Dad, will you come with me? Zane, Ralph, you too?”

Harry didn’t ask his son any questions. He studied James’ face for several seconds, and then glanced down at Zane and Ralph. “What do you two think? You up for playing a little hooky?”

James walked purposefully into the forest, followed at a short distance by Harry, Zane, and Ralph. He threaded through the smaller trees at the perimeter, heading into the deeper heart of the forest, where the trees were huge and ancient and the sun was all but blocked out by rafters of dense foliage. For several minutes, the foursome walked in silence, and then, finally, James stopped. He turned on the spot, looking up into the shushing leaves and gently creaking branches. There were no other sounds. Harry, Zane, and Ralph stood twenty feet away, watching quietly. James closed his eyes for a moment, thinking, and then opened them again and spoke.

“I know a lot of you aren’t awake,” he began, looking up into the looming heights of the trees, “and I know that some of you who are awake aren’t on our side. But the ones who are will hear me, and I hope you’ll help. Merlin is out there somewhere. He may be far, far away by now, but even so, I think you know where he is. He talks to you, and I am betting you talk to him, too. I know tree sprites can talk, because we’ve already met one of you. I have a message for Merlin.”

James stopped and took another deep breath, not entirely sure what he meant to say. It had simply occurred to him that he should try. He had been used by Delacroix to help bring Merlin into the world, despite the best efforts of those who’d wished to prevent it. The knowledge that he’d allowed himself to be manipulated was horrible to him. All this time, he’d believed he was doing good, saving the world from evil, walking in the steps of his hero father. And yet his best intentions had been warped against him, against the world he’d hoped to protect. He’d tried to do it alone, like his dad had done, but he’d failed. He’d aided evil. And now evil expected him to give up. James didn’t intend to give up, though. Maybe now he could try to help in a different way. It was probably a long shot, probably utterly hopeless, but he had to try. Maybe this was *his* way, after all.

“Merlin,” James said uncertainly, “you said that Austramaddux made a mistake in bringing you to our time. You said he was selfish, that he just wanted to get out of the duty he swore to you. But Headmistress McGonagall thinks that you’re wrong. She thinks that this is the very time you were meant to return to, because this world needs your help to stop a war that might destroy us all. Well... I know I’m just a kid, but I think you’re *both* wrong.”

James glanced back at his dad. Harry gave a small shrug and nodded.

“I listened to everything you said, and what everybody said after you left, and I think you were brought to this time because *you* need something. You don’t know for sure if you’ve really ever done right or wrong. You don’t know if you controlled your powers or if they controlled you. I think the truth is that the world *does* need you now, but that *you* need this world, too. This is your chance--maybe your last chance--to prove that you are a good wizard after all. People have wondered for centuries whether you were good or bad, but who cares what the rest of history says about you? If you know in your own heart that you did the right thing when it really mattered, then it doesn’t matter what anybody else says. I don’t say this because I understand it myself yet, but at least I’m trying to learn it. You’re in this time no matter what, Merlin. Whoever brought you here means for you to rescue the world, but... I think you’re also here to be rescued from yourself.”

James finished and sighed. He looked up, craning his neck and squinting, searching the trees for some sign that his message had been heard, and that it might be delivered. The leaves simply continued to skirl and shush in the breeze. The branches creaked quietly to themselves. After a minute, James stuffed his hands into his pockets and walked disconsolately back to his dad, Ralph, and Zane.

Zane clapped James on the shoulder as they turned to leave. “That was the hokiest pile of salami I’ve ever heard,” he said jovially. “But I think you meant it. I liked it, even if it never does get to Merlin’s ears.”

“Did you come up with that all by yourself?” Ralph asked. James shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

Harry didn’t say anything as they walked, but he put his arm around James’ shoulder and kept it there the whole way back. James thought it meant his dad approved, even if it wasn’t the way he himself would have done it. And then James realized, with some contentment, that his dad approved *because* it wasn’t the way he’d have done it. James smiled and enjoyed that moment of quiet revelation. Maybe learning this truth--the sort of truth that one has to learn on his own, despite all the people who’d tried to teach it with mere words--was worth everything that had happened so far. He only hoped that it was worth more than what might still be to come.



19. SECRETS UNVEILED

Harry joined James, Zane, and Ralph for a very late breakfast in the house-elf kitchens below the Great Hall. James noticed that the house-elf operating the enormous stove bellows was the grumpy house-elf who'd told the three boys they were on probation. He eyed them with unguarded suspicion, but didn't say anything. They crowded at a tiny table beneath an even tinier window and ate plates of kippers and toast and drank pumpkin juice and black tea. Finally, Harry suggested that the boys take a break and get cleaned up. They were still dressed in the clothes they had worn during the failed broomstick caper of the day before, and they were all decidedly grubby from their night in the forest. James was weary to the bone as well, and determined that he would collapse on his bed for at least ten minutes, school crisis or not.

On the way to the common room, James decided to take a detour to the hospital wing to collect his backpack. Philia Goyle and Murdock were no longer guarding the doors, of course, but James was surprised to see Hagrid crammed onto one of the benches nearby, flipping through a thick magazine called *Beasts and Boondocks*. He glanced up, closing the magazine.

"James, good to see yeh," he said warmly, apparently trying to keep his voice quiet. "Heard yeh was back safe and sound. Seen your father, then, I'd wager?"

"Yeah, just left him," James answered, peeking into the cracked doors of the hospital wing. "What are you doing here, Hagrid?"

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? I’m keepin’ watch, I am. Nobody in nor out ‘less it’s by permission o’ the Headmistress. Needs his rest and ‘cuperation, after all he’s been through.”

“Who?” James asked, suddenly interested. He peered more closely into the crack between the doors. There was a shape lying still on one of the beds, but James couldn’t make out any features.

“Why, Professor Jackson, a’course!” Hagrid said, standing and joining James by the doors. He peeked over James’ head with one beady black eye. “Haven’t you heard? Showed up in the courtyard ‘alf an hour ago, looking quite a fright,” he whispered. “Caused no end o’ commotion when the students out there caught sight of ‘im. We brought ‘im in here straight away and I was given the post of keepin’ an eye on the doors while Madam Curio ‘tended to ‘im.”

James looked up at Hagrid. “He’s injured?”

“That’s what we thought at first,” Hagrid said, stepping back. “But Madam Curio says he’s all right except for a few broken ribs, some burns on ‘is arms, a nasty bruise on the skull and about a million cuts and scratches. He’s been in a duel, she’s says, and a long one, at that. Happened during the night, out in the forest. That’s all we could get out of ‘im before he conked out.”

“A duel?” James repeated, knitting his brow. “But Delacroix broke his wand!”

“Did she?” Hagrid said, impressed. “Now, why’d she go and do a thing like that, then?”

“She was the one he was dueling against, Hagrid,” James said tiredly. “He and she... look, I’ll explain later. But I saw her break his wand in two pieces. I saw the bits. He left them behind.”

“Weerrrl...,” Hagrid said, resuming his seat and producing a long, pained groan from the bench. “He’s American, y’ know. They like to carry more’n one wand around. Comes from all that old Wild West lore and all. They sticks ‘em in their boots and up their sleeves and hide ‘em in their canes and such. Everybody knows that, don’t they?”

James peered into the crack of the hospital doors again, but he still couldn’t make anything of the shape on the mattress. “Sorry, Professor,” he said quietly. “But I hope you gave her royal hell.”

“What’s that, James?” Hagrid said, glancing up.

“I just came for my backpack,” James answered quickly. “I left it in there last night.”

“I don’t s’pose yeh might want to come back later for it, would yeh?” Hagrid asked earnestly. “Only I’ve got my orders, here. Nobody in nor out. The Headmistress thinks that whoever attacked Jackson might come looking for him. Can’t rule out it was that crazy nutter pretending to be Merlin.”

“It was Delacroix, Hagrid. But yeah. I can come back later. Good work.”

Hagrid nodded, and then flopped his magazine open onto his lap again. James turned and headed back the way he'd come.

The Gryffindor common room was empty. The fire in the grate had burned down to red embers, but it had warmed up enough outside that it wasn't necessary anyway. In fact, as James headed up the stairs to the sleeping quarters, he felt a gust of cool, fresh air push past him. Someone had apparently left a window open upstairs. He was just wondering if he should shut it or not when he topped the landing and saw Merlin reclined comfortably on his bed.

"Here is my little counselor, after all," Merlin said, looking up and lowering James' Technomancy textbook.

James glanced at the open window next to his bed, then back to Merlin. "You," he said, his mind boggling slightly. "Did you..." He pointed uncertainly at the window.

"Did I fly in through it?" Merlin said, laying the book aside almost reverently. "Lofted upon the wings of my skyborne brethren? What do you think, James Potter?"

James closed his mouth, realizing that this was a kind of test. He pushed his first thoughts aside and looked around.

"No," he answered. "No, actually, I think you just opened the window because you like the air."

"I like the scents of the air, especially this time of year," the great wizard replied, looking toward the open window. "The essence of growth and life comes from the earth now, filling the sky. Even the non-magicked feel it. They say that 'love' is in the air in springtime. It's close enough to the truth not to matter, but it isn't love of a man and a woman. It is the love of dirt for root, and leaf for sunlight, and yes, wing for air."

"But you *wanted* me to believe that you came in through the window, didn't you?" James said, feeling carefully emboldened.

Merlin smiled slightly and studied James. "Nine-tenths of magic happens in the mind, James Potter. The greatest trick of all is to know what your audience expects to see, and making sure they do."

James approached another bed and sat on it. "Is this what you came to talk about? Or are you here because you got my message?"

"I have been privy to many things since you last saw me," the wizard answered. "I have moved in and out, to and fro. I have conversed with many old friends, reacquainted myself with the earth and the beasts and the air. I have met very strange things in the forest, articles of this age, and learned much of the way the world is in this time. I have studied you yourself and your people."

James smiled slowly, realizing something. “You never left us! You vanished from the top of the tower, let us think you flew off with the birds, but you didn’t *go* anywhere, did you? You just turned invisible!”

“You have rather a talent for looking beyond the flat of the mirror, James Potter,” Merlin said, his voice low and his face impassive. “But I will admit that I did hear everything your Professors Franklyn and Longbottom, and the Pendragon, and yes, your father, said about me. I was amused and angered that they presumed to know me so. And yet I am no slave to arrogance. I asked myself if what they supposed was true. I left then, and I visited my old lands. I went in and out, to and fro. I studied my own deep soul as Franklyn supposed I should. And I found there was a shadow of truth in their words. A shadow...”

Merlin paused for a long moment. James decided not to say anything, but simply watched the wizard. His face remained utterly immobile, but his eyes were distant. After no less than two minutes, Merlin spoke again.

“But a shadow was not enough to bring me back to the mire of double-speak and confused loyalties that pass for battle-lines in this benighted age. I was far-off, exploring, seeking space and land and uninterrupted earth, already sinking into the deep language of the wind and the rain, when there was a new note in the song of the trees. Your message, James Potter.”

James was amazed to see that there was finally emotion on the enormous man’s face. He looked at James nakedly, his eyes suddenly wet. James felt shame for the man’s raw expression of anguish. He even felt a little guilty for his own words, words that had apparently, shockingly, pierced this enormous man’s hidden heart. Then, as if the anguish had never been there, the massive, stony face composed itself. It was not a matter of masking the emotion, James realized. He was simply witnessing the workings of emotion in a man whose culture was utterly alien to him, where the heart was so close to the surface that deep emotion could pass over the face shamelessly and completely, like a cloud obscuring the sun but for a moment.

“Thus, James Potter,” the wizard said, standing slowly, so that he seemed to fill the room. “I return. I am at your service. My soul does indeed require this. I have learned much of this world during my travels this day, and I love little of it, but there is a present evil, even though it is masked with duplicity and etiquette. Perhaps defeating that evil is secondary even to stripping that evil of its façade of respectability.”

James grinned and jumped up as well, not sure whether to shake Merlin’s hand, hug him, or bow. He settled for pumping his fist once in the air and proclaiming, “Yes! Er, thank you, Merlin. Er, Merlinus. Mr. Ambrosius?”

The wizard simply smiled, his ice-blue eyes twinkling.

“So,” James said, “what do we do? I mean, we only have a few hours before Prescott and his crew gather to film the school and everything. I guess I have to explain all that to you. Sheesh, this is going to take a while.”

“I am *Merlin*, James Potter,” the wizard said, sighing. “I have already learned as much as I need to know about this world and how it works. You’d be quite surprised, methinks, to learn how much the trees know of your culture. Mr. Prescott is not your problem. We simply need a council of allies to aid us.”

“All right,” James said, plopping back onto the bed. “What sort of allies do we need?”

Merlin’s eyes narrowed. “We require heroes of wit and cleverness, unafraid to foil convention in order to defend a higher allegiance. Battle skills matter not. What we need at this moment, James Potter, are scoundrels with honor.”

James nodded succinctly. “I know just the group. Scoundrels with honor. Got it.”

“Then let us have at it, my young counselor,” Merlin said, smiling a little frighteningly. “Lead on.”

“So,” James said as he led Merlin down out of the portrait hole, “do you think we’ll win?”

“Mr. Potter,” Merlin said breezily, stepping out onto the landing and placing his fists on his hips, “you won the moment I decided to join you.”

“Is that the famous Merlin pride talking?” James asked tentatively.

“Like I said,” Merlin replied, turning to follow James with his long, slow stride, “nine-tenths of magic happens in the mind. The last tenth, Mr. Potter, is pure and unadulterated bluster. Take note of that and you’ll do very well.”



After the bright, misty morning, the day progressed into a hazy stillness of unseasonable warmth. Headmistress McGonagall had insisted that classes continue, even during the tour of Martin J. Prescott and his entourage, but in spite of her order, dozens of students had gathered in the courtyard to witness the arrival of the Muggle reporter’s crew. Near the front of the group, James and Harry stood side by side. Only a few feet away, Tabitha Corsica and her Slytherin compatriots were looking decidedly bright-eyed and eager. On the top of the main steps, Headmistress McGonagall was flanked by Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant. Martin Prescott, on the lowest step, glanced at his watch.

“Are you sure they can get their vehicles in through the way you described, Miss Sacarhina?” he said, glancing up to where she stood, squinting in the sunlight. “They will be driving vehicles with *wheels*, as I’ve said. You know. Wheels. There aren’t any magical mud bogs or bridges with trolls living under them or anything, are there?”

Sacarhina was about to answer when the sound of automobile engines became audible in the near distance. Prescott jumped and spun on the spot, craning to catch a glimpse of his crew. James, standing near the front of the crowd of students with his dad, thought Headmistress McGonagall was handling herself pretty well, considering everything. She merely pressed her lips tightly together as the huge vehicles rumbled into the courtyard. There were two of them, and James recognized them as the sort of enormous off-road trucks Zane called ‘Landrovers’. The first one ground to a halt directly in front of the steps. All four doors popped open and men began to emerge, blinking in the hazy sunlight and carrying large leather bags covered in thick pockets. Prescott scampered down among the men, calling them by name, pointing and yelling directions.

“I want lights and reflectors on the left side of the steps, angled toward the doors. That’s where I’ll do my final commentary and conduct interviews. Eddie, you have the chairs? No? All right, that’s fine, we’ll stand. Sitting might seem too, you know, *established*, anyway. We want to keep the feeling of *exposé* alive the whole time. Which cameras do you have, Vince? I want the thirty-five-millimeter handycam on everything. Double film the whole shoot with it, got it? We’ll edit the footage in here and there for that hidden camera feel. Perfect. Where’s Greta with the makeup?”

The crew completely ignored the assembly of students and the Headmistress and Ministry officials on the steps. All around the trucks was the well-oiled bustle of men assembling cameras, attaching electrical cords to lights, stringing microphones onto long poles, and saying “Test,” and “Check,” into smaller microphones meant to be clipped to Prescott’s shirt. James noticed a few individuals moving among the group that didn’t seem preoccupied with the technical preparations. They were dressed rather better and seemed curious about the castle and the grounds. One of them, an old, balding, friendly-looking man in a light grey suit, ambled up the stairs toward the Headmistress.

“Quite the fuss, isn’t it?” he proclaimed, glancing back toward the trucks. He bowed slightly toward the Headmistress. “Randolph Finney, detective, British Special Police. Not quite retired, but close enough not to matter. Mr. Prescott may have mentioned me? He made rather a big deal of my being here, it seems. Between you and me, I suspect he’d hoped for someone a bit more, er, inspiring, if you take my meaning. So this is some sort of... school, I understand?”

“Indeed it is, Mr. Finney,” Sacarhina said, stretching out her hand. “My name is Brenda Sacarhina, head of the Department of Ambassadorial Relations for the Ministry of Magic. Today is going to be a very interesting day for you, I suspect.”

“Ministry of Magic. How perfectly quaint,” Finney said, shaking Sacarhina’s hand rather distantly. His gaze hadn’t strayed from the Headmistress. “And who might you be, Madam?”

“This is--,” Sacarhina replied, but McGonagall, long accustomed to overriding unwelcome noises, spoke easily over her.

“Minerva McGonagall, Mr. Finney. Pleased to meet you. I am Headmistress of this school.”

“Charmed, charmed!” Finney said, taking McGonagall’s hand reverently and bowing again. “Headmistress McGonagall, I am delighted to meet you.”

“Please, do call me Minerva,” McGonagall said, and James saw just the slightest pained look pass over her face.

“Indeed. And call me Randolph, I insist.” Finney smiled at the Headmistress for several seconds, then cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. He turned on the spot, taking in the castle and grounds. “I’d never known there was a school in this area, to tell you the truth. Especially one as magnificent as this. Why, it should be on the register of historic places and no mistake, Minerva. What do you call it?”

Sacarhina began to answer, but nothing came out. She made a tiny noise, coughed a little, and then covered her mouth daintily with one hand, a look of mild puzzlement on her face.

“Hogwarts, Randolph,” McGonagall answered, smiling carefully. “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“You don’t say?” Finney replied, glancing at her. “How wonderfully whimsical.”

“We like to think so.”

“Detective Finney!” Prescott suddenly called, trotting up the steps, his face covered in pancake make-up and tissue paper stuffed into the collar of his shirt. “I see you’ve already met the Headmistress. Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant are here to conduct the tour, of course. The Headmistress is just along for, er, color, as it were.”

“And she performs her role quite well, doesn’t she?” Finney said, turning back to McGonagall with a grin. James saw that the Headmistress was refraining rather heroically from rolling her eyes.

“You have met Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant, then?” Prescott plowed on, moving between Finney and McGonagall. “Miss Sacarhina, perhaps you will tell Detective Finney a bit of what it is you do here?”

Sacarhina smiled charmingly and stepped forward, threading her arm through Finney’s in an attempt to lead him away from Headmistress McGonagall.

“...” Sacarhina said. She paused, then closed her mouth and tried to look down at it, which produced a rather odd expression. Finney regarded her with a slightly furrowed brow.

“Are you quite all right, Miss?”

“Miss Sacarhina is feeling just a tad under the weather, Detective Finney,” Recreant said, adopting an ingratiating grin that was no match for Sacarhina’s practiced smile. “Do allow me. This is a school of magic, as the Headmistress has already mentioned. It is, in fact, a school for witches and wizards. We--” Recreant’s next word seemed to catch in his throat. He stood with his mouth open, staring at Finney and looking rather like an asphyxiating fish. After a long, awkward moment, he closed his mouth. He tried to smile again, showing far too many large, uneven teeth.

Finney’s brow was still furrowed. He disengaged from Sacarhina’s arm and glanced between both her and Recreant. “Yes? Spit it out, then, why don’t you? Are you *both* ill?”

Prescott was very nearly hopping from foot to foot. “Perhaps we should just begin the tour, then, shall we? Of course, I know my way around the castle a bit now. We can begin as soon as... as soon as...” He realized he still had tissues jammed into the collar of his shirt. He grabbed at them and stuffed them into his pants pockets. “Miss Sacarhina, you had mentioned that there would be someone else? An expert in explaining things to the uninitiated? Perhaps now would be a good time to introduce this person?”

Sacarhina craned her head forward, her eyes bulging very slightly and her mouth open. After a few seconds of strained silence, the Headmistress cleared her throat and gestured toward the open courtyard. “Here he is now, I suspect. You know how Mr. Hubert tends to be rather late sometimes. Poor man will forget his own head one of these days. Still, he is a genius in his own way, isn’t he, Brenda?”

Her mouth still open, Sacarhina turned to follow McGonagall’s pointing hand. At the opening of the courtyard, another vehicle was entering. It was ancient, its engine choppy and puttering a pall of blue smoke. Finney frowned a little as it chugged slowly across the courtyard. Sacarhina and Recreant stared at the vehicle with twin expressions of pure bewilderment and disgust. The crowd of students gathered near the steps moved back as the vehicle squeaked to a stop in front of the first Landrover, pointing at it. The engine coughed, sputtered, and then died, slowly.

“That’s a Ford Anglia, isn’t it?” Finney said. “I haven’t seen one of those in decades! I’m amazed it still runs.”

“Oh, our Mr. Hubert is very good with engines, Randolph,” McGonagall said crisply. “Why, he’s almost a wizard, really.”

The driver’s door squeaked open and a figure clambered up out of it. He was very large, so that the car rose perceptibly on its springs as he arose from it. The man squinted at the stairs, smiling a little vacantly. He had long, silvery blonde hair and a matching beard, both of which were offset by a gigantic pair of black, horn-rimmed glasses. The man’s hair was pulled back in a natty, almost prim ponytail.

“Mr. Terrence Hubert,” McGonagall said, introducing the man. “Chancellor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Welcome, sir. Do come and meet our guests.”

Mr. Hubert smiled and then glanced aside as the passenger’s door of the Anglia screeched open.

“I hope you don’t mind, everybody,” Mr. Hubert said, adjusting his glasses. “I’ve brought my wife along with me. Say hello to the folks, dear.”

James gasped as Madame Delacroix climbed awkwardly out of the car. She smiled very slowly and deliberately. “Hello,” she said in a strangely monotone voice.

Hubert grinned mistily at her. “She’s a dearie, isn’t she? Well, shall we begin, then?”

Sacrhina coughed, her eyes widening rather alarmingly as she watched Delacroix join Mr. Hubert in front of the Anglia. She nudged Recreant with her elbow, but he was as mute as she was.

“Chancellor?” Prescott said, looking back and forth between Hubert and McGonagall. “There’s no chancellor! Since when is there a chancellor?”

“I do apologize, sir,” Hubert said, climbing the steps with Delacroix by his side. She grinned a bit wildly. “I’ve been away for the past week. Business in Montreal, Canada, of all places. Wonderful little distribution warehouse there. You know, we only use the highest quality magical supplies here, of course. I inspect all our materials by hand before ordering anything. Oh, but I shouldn’t say any more, of course. Heh, heh!” Hubert tapped the side of his nose with an index finger, grinning conspiratorially at Prescott.

Prescott’s face was tight with suspicion. He stared at Hubert, then at Madame Delacroix. Finally, he held up his hands and closed his eyes. “All right, who cares? Mr. Hubert, if you are our guide, then guide away.” He threw a glance over his shoulder at the camera crew, gesturing wildly with his eyebrows, and then followed Hubert into the gigantic open doors. “Chancellor Hubert, can you tell us and our audience what you do here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?”

“Why, of course,” Hubert said, turning as he reached the center of the Entrance Hall. “We teach magic! We are, in fact, Europe’s premiere school of the magical arts.” Hubert seemed to notice the camera for the first time. He grinned a little nervously into it. “Students, er, come from the farthest reaches of the continent, and even beyond, to learn the ancient arts of the mystical masters of the craft. To acquire, to absorb, to, er, steep, as it were, in the secret arts of divination, illumination, prestidigitation, and, er, etcetera, etcetera.”

Prescott was staring very hard at Hubert, his cheeks reddening. “I see. Yes, so you admit that you teach *actual magic* within these walls?”

“Why, certainly, young man. Why ever would I deny it?”

“Then you do not deny,” Prescott said in a pouncing sort of voice, “that these paintings, which line this very room, are magical, *moving* paintings?” He gestured grandly toward the walls. The cameraman spun and walked as quickly and smoothly as he could toward a group of paintings by the doorway. The boom microphone operator lowered his apparatus, so as to be sure to capture Hubert’s response.

“M-moving paintings?” Hubert said in a distracted voice. “Oh. O-ho yes. Well, I suspect they could be said to move. Why, that painting there, no matter where you are in the room, the eyes in the painting are always upon you.” Hubert raised his hands mysteriously, warming to the subject. “They seem, in fact, to follow you *everywhere you go!*”

The cameraman took his eye away from the viewfinder and frowned back at Prescott. Prescott’s face darkened. “That’s not what I mean. Make them move! You know they can! You!” He spun on his heels and pointed at McGonagall. “You had a conversation with a portrait in your office just yesterday! I watched you! I heard the painting talk!”

McGonagall made a face that was so comically surprised that James, who was standing just inside the doorway with the rest of the assembled students, had to suppress a giggle. “I can’t imagine what you mean, sir,” the Headmistress replied.

“Here, now, you leave the lady out of this, why don’t you?” Finney said archly, taking half a step in front of the Headmistress, who was a full head taller than him. “Just you conduct your almighty investigation, Prescott, and let’s get this over with.”

Prescott boggled for a few seconds, and then composed himself. “Ooookay. Forget the moving paintings. Silly me.” He turned back to Hubert. “I presume class is currently in session, Mr. Hubert?”

“Hm?” Hubert said, as if startled. “In session? Well, I... I guess so. I wouldn’t expect--”

“You wouldn’t expect we’d like to see, would you?” Prescott interrupted. “Well, we would. Our viewers have a right to know exactly what is going on here, right... under... our... noses.”

“Viewers?” Hubert repeated, glancing back to the camera. “This is, er, *live*? Is it?”

Prescott dropped his head forward and slumped a bit. “No, Mr. Hubert. It isn’t. Didn’t any of you tell him how this works? We record it, we edit it, we broadcast it. Miss Sacarhina, you understood all of this, am I correct?” He glanced aside at Sacarhina, who smiled and spread her arms. She mouthed a few words, and then gestured vaguely at her throat. Recreant cinched his grin a notch higher. His forehead was beaded with sweat. “Great,” Prescott muttered. “I see. Marvelous. Continuing.” He straightened and glared at Hubert again. “Yes, our viewers would very much like to see what happens in these so-called ‘classrooms’, Mr. Chancellor. Please lead the way.”

Hubert turned to Delacroix. “What do you think, dear? Divination or Levitation?”

“Dey are both equally impressive. Honey,” Delacroix said, forming the words rather awkwardly. She seemed to want to say more, but despite the workings of her jaw, her lips clamped tightly shut.

“My wife is foreign, as you can see,” Hubert said apologetically. “But she does her best.”

“The classrooms, please, Mr. Hubert,” Prescott insisted. “You can’t keep the press out, sir.”

“No, no, of course not. We appreciate the publicity, in fact,” Hubert said, turning to lead the crew down a hall. “Prestigious as we are, sometimes, it’s hard to keep our heads above water. Magic is a, er, *specialized* study, to say the least. Only a certain kind of individual has the patience and grace to learn it. Ah, here we are then. Divination.”

Prescott walked briskly into the open doorway of the classroom, followed by his camera crew and boom microphone operator, scrambling to keep up with him. Finney remained near the back of the group, staying as close to Headmistress McGonagall as he could. Harry and James, at the head of the crowd of curious students, leaned in through the door to watch.

“Here, our students learn the ancient art of predicting the future,” Hubert said grandly. A dozen students were scattered around the room, staring grimly down at the objects on the desks in front of them. At the head of the class, as if on cue, Professor Trelawney raised her arms, producing a musical jingling from the assortment of bangles on her wrists.

“Seek, students!” she cried in her mistiest voice. “Stare deep, deep into the face of the all-knowing cosmos, represented in the swirling patterns and designs of the infinite! Find your destinies!”

“Tea leaves!” Finney said happily. “My own mam used to read fortunes in tea leaves for the tourists! Got us through some hard times, back in the day. How perfectly picturesque, keeping such traditions alive.”

“Traditions’, pah!” Trelawney said, arising from her seat and swirling her gauzy robes dramatically. “We find the embedded nature of perfect truth in the leaves, sir. Past, present, future, all bound together for those who bear the eyes to see!”

“That’s just what my mam used to say, too!” chuckled Finney.

“This is how you tell the future?” Prescott said, staring disgustedly into one of the students’ cups. “This is ridiculous. Where’re the crystal balls? Where’s the swirling smoke and the ghostly visions?”

“Well, er, we have those things, too, Mr. Prescott,” Hubert said. “Don’t we, dear?”

“Advanced Divination. Second semester. Two hundred-pound lab fee,” Delacroix replied mechanically.

“Covers the crystal balls,” Hubert said behind his raised hand. “Those things aren’t cheap. We have them special made in China. Real crystal and everything. Of course, the students get to take them home at the end of the school year. They’re kind of a memento.”

“I believe you mentioned levitation!” Prescott said, marching out of the room. His entourage followed swiftly, clanking and unrolling more electrical cord.

“Certainly, yes. A staple of the magical arts,” Hubert replied, following Prescott across the hall and into another classroom. “We combine that class with Basic Prestidigitation. Yes, right in here.”

Zane stood in the center of the classroom with a wand in his hand. A few dozen other students sat along the wall, watching in amazement as the bust of Godric Gryffindor floated and bobbed around the room, apparently at the behest of Zane's waving wand. There was a gasp and sigh of amazement from Prescott's crew. The cameraman squatted slowly, zooming in on the action.

"Aha!" Prescott said excitedly. "Real magic! Being performed by children!"

"Just as promised," Hubert said proudly. "Mr. Walker here is among the best in his class. Mr. Walker, what year are you, by the way?"

"First year, sir," Zane said, grinning happily.

"Excellent form, my boy," Hubert replied. "Try a loop, why don't you?"

The students applauded politely as the bust raised and spun slowly in the air. Then, suddenly, it dropped, falling onto a mattress which had been placed in the center of the floor.

"Oh, too bad, Mr. Walker. So close," Hubert chided.

"It wasn't my fault!" Zane yelled. "It was my backstage! Ted, you dolt, you yanked when you were supposed to swoop! How many times do I have to explain that!"

"Hey!" Ted objected, bursting noisily out of a closet at the rear of the room. He held a handful of wires in his hand, all of which snaked up to a series of pulleys attached to the ceiling of the closet. "You want to try coming back here and working these controls in the dark? Huh? Besides, Noah is the one to blame. He was slow with the cross pulley."

A voice from the depths of the closet yelled angrily, "What? That's it! I want to be on stage next time. I've had it with this 'assistant' role. I want to wear the hat!"

"Nobody's wearing the hat, Noah," Zane said, rolling his eyes.

"Well, *somebody* needs to wear the hat!" Noah cried, his face appearing around the doorway of the closet. "How does anybody know who's the magician and who's the assistant?"

"Boys, boys," Hubert placated, raising his hands. "We only have one hat per classroom, and Miss Morganstern is using it to practice the rabbit trick. Mr. Prescott, Mr. Finney, would you like to see the rabbit trick?"

"Why, yes," Finney said brightly.

"No!" Prescott yelled.

Tabitha Corsica had pushed herself to the front of the students crowding the doorway. Her face was red with anger. "Mr. Prescott," she began, "you--"

Hubert turned slowly to face Tabitha. “This is hardly the time for autographs, Miss Corsica.”

“I’m not here to get his autograph, *Chancellor...*,” Tabitha spat, raising her arm to point at Hubert. There was a small notebook and a pen clutched in her hand. She stopped in mid-sentence, staring at the two items. The cover of the notebook was pink and had the word ‘autographs’ printed on it in white script.

“There will be plenty of time later for such things, Miss Corsica. But I’m sure Mr. Prescott is flattered by your, er, interest.”

“Chancellor Hubert?” Petra interjected, peering into a black top hat which was sitting atop a ridiculously glittery table. “I think something might be wrong with Mr. Wiffles. Do rabbits usually lie on their backs like that?”

“Not now, Miss Morganstern,” Hubert said, flapping his hand dismissively. “Mr. Prescott, I believe you wanted to see our sawing-in-half room?”

But Prescott was gone, stalking past the suddenly silent Tabitha Corsica and heading down the corridor behind her. The crew scrambled to chase him as he poked his head into each room. At the end of the hall, he gave a muffled shout of triumph and waved for his crew to join him in the furthest classroom.

“Here!” Prescott yelled, gesturing wildly with his right arm. The crowd poured into the room, followed by the watching students, who were beginning to grin. “Right before your eyes! *A ghost professor!* Make sure you get plenty of footage of this, Vince! Proof of the afterlife!”

There was no gasp of surprise this time. Vince moved in close, focusing carefully with one hand.

“Ah, yes. Professor Binns,” Hubert said happily. “Say hello to the nice folks.”

Professor Binns blinked owlshly and passed his gaze over the crowd. “Greetings,” he said in his thin, distant voice.

“It’s just a projection on smoke,” Vince, the cameraman, announced.

“Well,” Hubert said, a bit defensively, “he’s not meant to be seen quite so close to like that. The students are usually well back from him. Creates a nice sense of mystery and the supernatural, really.”

Ralph was among the students seated in the classroom. He addressed the cameraman with a note of annoyance. “You’re ruining the effect, you know. You don’t have to go and spoil it for everybody.”

“Greetings,” Binns said again, passing his gaze over the crowd.

“Impossible!” Prescott shouted angrily, striding toward the front of the room. “It’s a ghost! I know it is!”

“It’s a projection, Martin,” Vince said, lowering the camera. “I’ve seen these before. It’s not even a very good one. You can hear the projector running. It’s right there, under the desk. And see here? Dry ice machine. Makes the smoke.”

Finney cleared his throat near the door. “This is getting rather embarrassing, Mr. Prescott.”

“Greetings,” said Professor Binns.

Prescott turned wildly. He was obviously coming rather unraveled. “No!” he shouted. “This is all a setup! It’s *his* fault! He’s trying to trick all of you!” He pointed at Hubert.

“Well, that is what we do here,” Hubert said, smiling politely. “We’re in the business of tricks. Although we prefer the term ‘illusion’, if you don’t mind.”

“It’s maaaaa-gic,” Delacroix suddenly said, a bit inanely. She gave a ghastly grin.

“I see what you’re all trying to do here,” Prescott said, still pointing at Hubert, and then McGonagall and even Sacarhina and Recreant, who shook their heads vigorously. “You’re trying to make me look like a madman! Well, my public knows me better than that, and so do my associates. You can’t hide everything! What about the moving staircases? Or the giants? Hmm? Or...” Prescott stopped, his finger still in mid-point. His eyes went unfocussed for a moment, and then he grinned maliciously. “I know just the thing. Just the thing indeed. Vince, Eddie, the rest of you, come with me.”

Hubert followed as the crew clanked and jostled through the crowd of students. “Where are you going, Mr. Prescott? I’m your guide, if you recall. I’ll show you whatever you wish.”

“Yes?” Prescott said, spinning back toward Hubert. The curious students had parted for him and his crew, so that Prescott glared back between them, glancing from side to side. “Will you show me...,” he paused dramatically and tilted his head up, “the Garage?”

“The...,” Hubert began. He blinked, and then looked aside at Professor McGonagall. James suddenly felt Harry’s hand tighten on his shoulder. Something was wrong. “The... Garage?” Hubert repeated, as if he was unfamiliar with the word.

Prescott’s grin grew predatory. “Aha! Weren’t prepared for that, were you? Yes, I had myself a good long look around the grounds while you were all busy this morning. Peeked here and there and got quite an eyeful! There is a garage,” he said, turning to face the camera, “that penetrates the very fabric of space and time, creating a magical portal between this place and another place thousands of kilometers away! America, if I may be so bold as to guess! I have seen it myself. I have been inside the structure, and smelled the air of that far-off place. I have seen the sunrise of that land, while the sun here was high above the horizon. It was no trick, no illusion. These people would have us believe that they are mere tricksters, while I maintain, as I have witnessed with my own eyes, that they are dabblers in a form of magic that is purely and simply supernatural. Now I will prove it!” With a flourish, Prescott turned and marched away, heading back to the Entrance Hall. Harry fell in line next to Hubert, but couldn’t get his attention.

“Mr. Prescott!” Hubert yelled over the sound of the now agitated crowd. “I really must insist that you allow me... Mr. Prescott! This is highly irregular!”

Prescott led his crew out of the main entrance and across the courtyard. The crowd of students had grown considerably, and the noise of their passage had become quite loud. Everyone had seen the exterior of the Alma Aleron’s Garage, but very few had been inside or seen what it housed. The babble of worry and curiosity was a dull roar.

“This could be bad, James,” Harry said, keeping his voice below the noise of the crowd.

“What can we do?”

Harry merely shook his head, watching Prescott turn the corner, leading the group toward the canvas structure overlooking the lake. He turned, framing himself before its canvas walls. His crew arranged themselves in position, lowering the boom microphone over him and adjusting huge white umbrellas to reflect the sunlight on his shadowed side. Prescott turned slightly, showing his best side to the camera as Vince squatted slowly, focusing. It was, James had to admit, a very dramatic moment.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Prescott began, raising his natural orator’s voice, “my crew and I, and all of you, have been the victims of an elaborate hoax. This is no simple school of sleight of hand and card tricks. No, I have witnessed within these walls true magic of the most astounding and blood-chilling variety. I have seen ghosts and watched actual levitations. I have observed doors appearing magically in otherwise solid stone walls. I have seen beasts and giants that boggle the mind. Today, we have been played for fools, deceived by a pack of wizards and witches--yes, actual magical people--who believe they can fool us with parlor tricks. But now I will reveal the truth of this place. Behind this canvas is a form of uncanny magic that will shock and astound you. When this truth is revealed, Mr. Rudolph Finney, detective for the British Special Police, will be inclined to launch a full-scale, official investigation into this establishment, with the help of police agencies from all across Europe. After today, ladies and gentlemen, our lives will never be the same again. After today, we will be living in a world where we know, without a doubt, that witches and wizards are real, and that they walk among us.”

Prescott paused, letting his words echo over the stunned crowd. Then he turned toward the area where McGonagall, Hubert, Sacarhina, and Recreant were gathered. Finney stood next to the Headmistress, frowning slightly, his eyes wide. “Mr. Hubert,” Prescott called out, “will you open these doors for us? This is your last chance to do the right thing.”

Hubert’s expression was grave. He stared very directly at Prescott. “I have to advise you against this course of action, Mr. Prescott.”

“You open it or I will.”

“You’ll ruin everything, sir,” Hubert said. Next to him, Delacroix was grinning even more manically.

“I’ll ruin nothing but your secret, Mr. Hubert. The world needs to know what is behind those canvas doors.”

Hubert seemed frozen in place. It looked as if he wasn’t going to do it. And then he moved forward, lowering his head. There was a long, collective gasp from the crowd. Prescott stepped aside, glancing triumphantly at the camera as he did so. Hubert approached the tent and stood in front of it. He sighed deeply, and then reached up, grasping the knotted strips of canvas that held the tent’s wide flaps closed. He turned his head to look at Prescott. After a terrible pause, he pulled. The knot came undone and the flaps dropped open, unfurling like flags, slapping the poles at either side of the broad tent opening. The crowd gasped, and then there was a long, puzzled silence.

James peered in. He couldn’t immediately make out what it was. The inside of the tent was rather dark, but he could see that the flying vehicles were gone. Most of the tent’s interior was obscured by a large, oblong shape. A few people near the front of the crowd began to giggle, and then a wave of laughter washed over the crowd.

“Well, you’ve done it,” Hubert said, still staring at Prescott. “You’ve ruined the secret. And this was meant to be our big finish. I have to say, sir, you are no fun at all.” Hubert finally stepped back, getting out of the way of the tent so that the camera crew could see directly inside. Tiny, colored Christmas lights flashed in sequence around the huge papier-mâché flying saucer. Black letters were painted on the side, clearly visible in the flashing lights.

“And I hate to say it, Mr. Lupin,” Hubert said, turning to Ted, “but you misspelled ‘rocket’. How dreadfully embarrassing.”



20. TALE OF THE TRAITOR

“But I saw them!” Prescott said insistently, his voice growing rather hoarse as he followed Vince between the Landrovers. “Giants! One of them was as tall as the trees! They made footprints the size of... the size of...!” He gestured with his arms desperately. Ignoring him, Vince packed his camera into a foam-lined suitcase.

“You’ve made quite a fiasco for yourself, Mr. Prescott,” Detective Finney said, polishing his glasses on his tie. “Don’t make it any worse.”

Prescott turned to the older man, his eyes wild. “You’ve got to investigate this establishment, Detective! It’s not right! They’ve tricked you all!”

“If I spearhead any investigations, Mr. Prescott,” Finney said mildly, “they’ll be investigations of you and your methods. Did you have permission to trespass on these grounds in the first place?”

“What, are you mad?” Prescott sputtered. He stopped and collected himself. “Of course. As I’ve already told you, I was tipped off about what was happening here. Someone on the inside led me here.”

“And you checked the background of this person?”

“Well,” Prescott said, “the chocolate frog was pretty convincing. I didn’t really...”

“Excuse me. Did you just say ‘the chocolate frog?’” Finney asked, his eyes narrowing.

“I... er, well. The point is, yes, my source was quite certain that something strange was going on here...”

“That they were, in fact, teaching magic?”

“Yes. Er, no! Not tricks! *Real* magic! With monsters and giants and... and... vanishing doorways and flying cars!”

“And the chocolate frog confirmed this, did he?”

Prescott opened his mouth to answer, and then stopped. He straightened to his full height, angry and indignant. “You’re making fun of me.”

“You make it hard not to, sir. Would you be willing to let me speak to this source of yours?”

Prescott brightened. “Yes! In fact, I would! I arranged with Miss Sacarhina for him to come along. He’s right over...” He glanced around, his brow furrowing.

“You arranged with Miss Sacarhina?” Finney asked, glancing up toward the top of the courtyard steps. Much of the school faculty, as well as a number of students, were watching with benign interest as the crew industriously packed their gear. Neither Miss Sacarhina nor Mr. Recreant was in sight. “She knows this source of yours, does she?”

“She knows him, all right,” Prescott said, still scanning the crowd. “Where is he?”

“He came with the crew?” Finney asked, glancing around. “I don’t remember meeting him.”

“He was there. Quiet, squirrely fellow. Had a twitch in his right eyebrow.”

“Ah, him,” Finney nodded. “I thought he was a little odd. I’d very much like to have a word with him.”

“So would I,” Prescott agreed darkly.

On the top of the steps, Mr. Hubert turned toward Headmistress McGonagall, Neville, and Harry Potter. “I think we can trust our friends to manage their departure from here. Madam Headmistress, I believe we have a few loose ends to attend to?”

McGonagall nodded, then turned and led the group inside. Harry smiled down at James. “Come along, James. Ralph and Zane, you too.”

“Are you sure?” Ralph asked, glancing up at the Headmistress as she strode into the hall.

“Mr. Hubert’ specifically asked for you three to accompany us,” Harry replied.

“Nice to have friends in high places, isn’t it?” Zane said happily.

“Well,” the Headmistress said as they entered the empty silence of the Great Hall, “that went as well as could be expected, even if Mr. Ambrosius was a little heavy-handed with his Amorous Charm. Mr. Finney has *insisted* that I join him for dinner next time I find myself in London.”

“An offer I believe you should take him up on, Madam,” Merlin replied, taking off the gigantic horn-rimmed glasses and shaking his hair out of the ‘Mr. Hubert’ ponytail. “I enchanted him with the slightest possible charm. How could I have known that Detective Finney would have a natural predilection for tall, strong, handsome women?”

“How indeed,” McGonagall answered. “I believe you are grinning, sir.”

James spoke up. “But how’d you know about the Garage, Merlin? I thought for sure we were sunk!”

Merlin glanced back over his shoulder. “I didn’t know about the Garage, James Potter. It was beyond the knowledge of the trees, unlike the Anglia vehicle and Madame Delacroix. Improvisation, however, has always been one of my stronger talents.”

“But how’d you get the Wocket in there?” Ralph asked. “That was totally brilliant!”

“The trees knew about *that*, therefore, I did as well,” Merlin replied. “It was simply a matter of encouraging an exchange of environments.”

Zane grinned. “So the Alma Aleron’s cars are out in that old barn in the field?”

“It’ll do them some good, I expect,” Merlin nodded.

The group walked purposefully through the Great Hall and climbed the stairs onto the dais. McGonagall opened a door in the rear wall and led the others through, into a large antechamber with a stone floor and a dark fireplace. Sacarhina and Recreant were there, sitting on either side of a third person James didn’t recognize.

“This is an outrage, Headmistress,” Recreant said, leaping to his feet. “First, you bring in this... *person* to usurp our authority, and then you have the gall to perform the *Langlock* jinx on us! The Minister will--”

“Do shut up, Trenton,” Sacarhina said, rolling her eyes. Recreant blinked, wounded, but clamped his mouth shut. He looked back and forth from Sacarhina to the Headmistress.

“Wise advice, if ever I heard it,” Harry agreed, stepping forward. “And I suspect that the Minister will, in fact, hear about this.”

“We’ve done nothing wrong, Mr. Potter, as you know,” Sacarhina said, glancing idly at her fingernails. “Mr. Ambrosius’ appearance has secured the secrecy of the magical world. All is well.”

Harry nodded. "I am glad you feel that way, Brenda, although I find it interesting that you already seem to know 'Mr. Hubert's' real name. No doubt there will be no link proven to connect him, you, and the unfortunate Madame Delacroix. What are we to make of your friend, here, however?"

All attention turned to the man seated in the chair between Sacarhina and Recreant. He was small, pudgy, with thinning black hair and a twitch in his right eyebrow. He shrunk from the gaze of everyone in the room.

Ralph, who'd been the last to enter, pushed his way between Merlin and Professor Longbottom, his brow furrowed in bewilderment. "Dad?" he said, frowning. "What are *you* doing here?"

The man grimaced miserably and covered his face with his hands. Merlin looked down at Ralph, his large, stony face somber. He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "This man says his name is Dennis Deedle. I was afraid you'd recognize him."

"What *is* he doing here?" Neville asked.

"I think his role in this debacle is fairly evident," the Headmistress replied, sighing. "He is the man responsible for leading Mr. Prescott into our midst."

"What?" Ralph said, rounding on McGonagall. "Why would you say that? That's terrible!"

"He came with Mr. Prescott's crew," Harry said quietly. "He was trying to remain unobtrusive. Perhaps he was worried that you'd recognize him, Ralph. Later, when it was all over, it wouldn't have mattered, of course. But then again, things didn't happen as he expected."

"This is ridiculous," Ralph insisted. "Dad's a Muggle! He signed the Muggles' non-disclosure contract, didn't he? He wouldn't do this, even if he could! I don't know what he's doing here, but it isn't what you all think!"

Merlin still had his hand on Ralph's shoulder. He patted him slowly. "Perhaps you should ask him yourself, then, Mr. Deedle."

Ralph glanced up at the enormous wizard, his face pinched with anger and trepidation. He looked around the rest of the room, from face to face, ending with his father. "All right, then. Dad, why are you here?"

Dennis Deedle still had his hands on his face. For several seconds, he didn't move. Finally, he took a huge breath and sat back, dropping his hands. He looked at Ralph for a long moment, and then glanced around at everyone assembled.

"All right. Yes," he said, having composed himself, "I told Prescott. I sent him the Chocolate Frog and the GameDeck. I'd used it to communicate with somebody on the school grounds, somebody who went by the name Austramaddux. Once I'd done that, I knew that Prescott could locate the school with his GPS."

Ralph's face was frozen with disbelief and misery. "But why, Dad? Why would you do such a thing?"

"Oh, Ralph. I'm sorry. I know this looks bad to you," Dennis said. "But it's all very... very complicated. Prescott's show, *Inside View*, they offer money for proof of the supernatural. Well, we haven't been doing all that well, son. I've been looking for work ever since I got laid off, but it's been hard. We needed the money. I thought the Chocolate Frog would be enough. I really did! But Prescott wanted more. I knew I'd have to show him something really amazing, so..." He faltered, glancing nervously around the room again.

"But you never got the money," Merlin said in his low, rumbling voice. "And that wasn't the real point, was it?"

Dennis' eyebrows worked furiously as he gazed up at Merlin, apparently struggling with what to say. Next to him, Sacarhina cleared her throat meaningfully. Dennis glanced at her, taking his eyes from Merlin. "The money," he said uncertainly, "Prescott said we'd get it when the program aired. He promised."

"But there will be no program now," Merlin said quietly.

"You thought it'd be worth selling out the whole magical world just to help us get by for awhile, Dad?" Ralph said, his voice not accusing, but truly questioning. It broke James' heart to hear the disappointment in the boy's voice.

"No, son!" Dennis answered, but then looked away. "I didn't think it'd threaten the whole magical world. I mean, it's just a stupid television show. Besides..." He stopped, chewing on his words, wrestling with himself.

"Besides what?" Merlin asked calmly.

Dennis looked back at Merlin, his face tense, his right eyebrow twitching. "Besides, what did the magical world ever do for *me*?" he spat, then covered his face with his hands again. He took a deep, shuddering breath. "Left me all alone, that's what. Shunned and abandoned, like some kind of... some kind of worthless mutant! Stripped of my name and my family, abandoned by my own parents because I wasn't like them! I was forbidden to ever contact them or speak of them again. They said I'd be adopted into the Muggle world, where I belonged. They said I'd be happier there. Well, I guess I showed them, didn't I? They didn't want me to ruin their reputation in the magical world. Well, why should I care about the secrecy of the magical world at all?"

Ralph's face was a mask of unhappy consternation. "What are you talking about, Dad? You're not a wizard. Grandma and Grandpa died before I was born. You were as surprised as me when we got the letter from Hogwarts."

Dennis tried to smile at his son. "I'd almost forgotten about my own past, Ralph. It had been so long, and I'd tried so hard to bury it. I'm a Squib, son. Your grandparents and your uncle were witches and

wizards, but I wasn't born with their powers. They raised me for as long as they could, but they hated my nature. When I came of age and they could see for sure that I didn't have any magical skills, they couldn't bear it. They hid me from the rest of the magical world. I was their ugly little secret. But they couldn't hide me forever. Finally, when I was twelve, they sent me away. I went to a Muggle orphanage, under the pretense that my parents had died in an accident. They made me vow never to mention them and never to try and seek them. My mother was... she was sad. She cried and hid her face from me. But my father was hard. She couldn't budge him. He hired a Muggle driver to take us to the orphanage. Mother stayed in the car when my father took me inside. She tried to embrace me, to say goodbye, but Father wouldn't let her. He said it would be better for both of us. He performed memory modifications on the workers at the orphanage. He made them believe I had been delivered by the state after the deaths of my parents. I was given a bed and a set of clothes, and then my father left. I never saw my parents again."

Dennis Deedle's eyes didn't leave his son's face when Merlin spoke. "You were very hard done by, Mr. Deedle. I assume Deedle is not your given name, is it?"

"No. My father invented that name for me," Dennis said blandly. "I hate it."

"What is your given name, sir?"

"Dolohov," Ralph's father answered, his voice growing distant, almost dead. "My name is Denniston Gilles Dolohov. Son of Maximillion and Whilhelmina Dolohov. Younger step-brother of Antonin."

There was a moment of very cold silence, and then McGonagall spoke. "Mr. Dolohov, do you realize that what you've done could send you to Azkaban?"

Dennis blinked, as if coming out of a trance. "What? No, no, of course not. I was promised that nothing I did was against the law."

Sacrhina coughed lightly. "Perhaps, Mr. Deedle, you'd prefer to refrain from answering any more questions until your legal representation can be present."

"Why?" Dennis said, glancing at her in alarm. "Am I in trouble? You said--"

"It would be for your best interests, sir," Sacrhina interrupted.

"You said I was doing the world a favor!" Dennis exclaimed, getting to his feet. He glanced at Harry. "She promised me that I'd be taken care of even if Prescott and his people didn't come through with the money! She said this was more important than money, anyway! When I came to them--"

"Sit *down*, Mr. Deedle!" Sacrhina said, her voice icy.

"Don't call me that! I hate that name!" Dennis backed away from her, glancing back at Harry. "They told me it was all right to talk to Prescott! I told them what I was thinking of doing. I knew I had to check with the Ministry. They said the contract I'd signed wasn't binding because I wasn't a Muggle. And I

left the wizarding world before I was old enough to sign the Wizarding Vow of Secrecy, too, so I wasn't breaking any laws. She promised me it was all right! She said it was for everybody's good and that I'd be a hero!"

"Miss Sacarhina," Harry said, producing his wand, but not quite brandishing it, "what do you have to say in response to this man's accusations?"

"I have nothing to say whatsoever," she replied easily. "He is clearly deranged. No one would believe the word of such a person."

"Mr. Recreant?" Harry said, turning to the stunned man. "Do you concur with Miss Sacarhina's assessment?"

Recreant's eyes moved like flies, flicking back and forth between Sacarhina and Harry. "I'd..." he began, and then lowered both his eyes and his voice. "I'd like the chance to discuss this outside of Miss Sacarhina's hearing."

"Mr. Recreant, as your superior, I forbid--"

"You'll forbid nothing, Madam," Neville said sternly, slipping his own wand from his robes.

"In the name of ambassadorial security, I have to insist..." Sacarhina began, but stopped as Harry pointed his wand at her.

"In the name of the Ministry of Magic and the Auror Department," he said, "I place you, Miss Brenda Sacarhina, under arrest for attempted violation of section two of the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy and for the theft of Ministry of Magic property."

Sacarhina tried to smile, but it was a relatively poor attempt. "You can't prove anything, Mr. Potter. This is a foolish and dangerous game you are playing. I will only warn you once to stand down."

"You should think twice before conspiring with people who despise you, Miss Sacarhina," Merlin said, smiling ruefully. "I had a charming and illuminating conversation with Madame Delacroix when I discovered her in the forest. She has much to say about you, I'm afraid, and very little of it is what I'd be prepared to call flattering."

Neville was leading Mr. Recreant out of the room, with the Headmistress following. Harry gestured with his wand. "Come, Miss Sacarhina. Titus Hardcastle awaits to escort you back to the Ministry, and patience is not one of his stronger suits."

Sacarhina's face went blank as she realized she had no choice but to follow along. No doubt she had a very good defense ready, James thought as she stalked out of the room in front of his dad. People like her always had lots of ways to cover their tracks. Still, it didn't look good for Brenda Sacarhina. As the door

leading to the Great Hall swung open, James saw Titus Hardcastle grinning mirthlessly, his wand pointing carefully at the floor.

James found himself left only with Merlin, Zane, Ralph, and Dennis Dolohov

Dennis looked at his son, and then touched him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Ralph. I really am. I was... confused."

"You should've told me, Dad," Ralph said, dropping his eyes.

Dennis nodded. After a moment, he raised his eyes to Merlin. "Am I going to go to wizarding prison?" he asked, trying to firm his voice. "I'll... I'll go along quietly, I guess."

"Somehow, I suspect not, Mr. Dolohov," Merlin said, turning to lead the group out of the chamber. He opened the door leading to the Great Hall. "But your actions have resulted in quite a conundrum. It appears that this school's security, strong as it may once have been, is not quite prepared to meet the challenges of modern Muggle technology. Perhaps you'd have some thoughts on how to improve it?"

Dennis frowned. "What are you suggesting? You want my *help*?"

Merlin shrugged. "I am simply acknowledging a rather curious coincidence. You are in need of employment and we are in need of a revised security programme. As a wizard who also happens to be an expert in Muggle technology, you seem rather uniquely qualified to serve in that regard."

Dennis grinned in relief. "I'll think about that, sir."

"I am in no position to make any offers on behalf of this school, of course," Merlin said, crossing the Great Hall with his long, commanding stride. "But I know the Headmistress. I'll see what I can do."

"So," Zane said, following Ralph and James into the Entrance Hall, "turns out you were of solid magical stock after all, Ralph, even if they were a bunch of cruel, heartless purebloods. Not that it matters, really, but it does sort of explain why you were made a Slytherin."

"Maybe," Ralph said quietly. "This is all too much for me to take in one day. Either way, none of that magic was mine. It was the staff."

Merlin stopped near the stairs, and then turned slowly. He gazed at Ralph speculatively. "You were the keeper of my staff?"

"Yeah," Ralph answered dejectedly. "I kept it from killing anyone, I guess. But barely."

"Don't listen to him," Zane said. "He was spectacular with it. Saved James' life once with it. Grew a peach tree out of a banana, too! So he once burned a bald stripe onto Victoire's head in D.A.D.A. All of us have thought about doing that to her from time to time just to shut her up."

Merlin approached Ralph. James was certain the wizard hadn't been carrying his staff a moment before, but as he lowered himself to one knee in front of Ralph, he now held it in his right hand. The runes along its length were dark, but James remembered how they'd pulsed with green light the night before.

"Mr. Deedle--or shall I call you Mr. Dolohov?" Merlin said.

"I'm kind of attached to the Deedle," Ralph answered, glancing up at his father. "I don't know if I'm ready to be a Dolohov yet. Sorry, Dad." Dennis gave a small understanding smile.

"Mr. Deedle, then," Merlin said. "Not just any wizard could have born the responsibility of the staff. You have heard it said that the wand chooses the wizard, and this is true. Madame Delacroix believed you were merely a vessel to bring the staff to her, but she was mistaken. The staff chose you. A lesser wizard would have been unable even to hold the staff, much less use it. But you, without knowing it, brought the staff under your own power. You had no idea of the strength of it, and yet you managed it. It obeyed you, and that is the mark of a wizard of very, very great potential. Part of this staff now belongs to you, Mr. Deedle. I have felt it. I knew that a portion of it was no longer my own, but I knew not whose it was. Now I know."

Merlin lowered his staff so that it lay across his knee. He closed his eyes and felt along the length of the staff, his hand barely touching the wood. Faint green light moved within the runes, flickering. Merlin wrapped his hand around the lower, tapered end of his staff, then, with barely a twist, broke off the last foot of its length. He opened his eyes again and held the length of wood out to Ralph.

"You are, I believe, in need of a wand, Mr. Deedle."

Ralph took the length of wood from Merlin. As he did, the wood became his wand again, still ridiculously fat and chunky, with the lime green painted tip. Ralph grinned, turning it over in his hands.

"I wouldn't expect it to be quite as powerful as it once was, of course," Merlin said, turning his staff upright and using it to stand again. The staff was noticeably shorter now. "But I suspect you will still be able to do remarkable things with it."

"Thanks," Ralph said seriously.

"Don't thank me," Merlin said, raising an eyebrow. "It's yours, Mr. Deedle. You made it so."

"So the wizard gives the cowardly lion his courage," Zane said, grinning. "When does James here get some brains?"

Merlin cinched his eyebrow a bit higher, looking from Zane to James.

"Don't pay him any attention," James said, laughing and leading the group to the stairs. "It's a Muggle thing. We wouldn't understand."

“Come on!” Ralph called, running up the steps. “I want to show Ted and the rest of the Gremlins I’ve got my wand back! Tabitha Corsica can *keep* her stupid broom.”

The three boys scrambled up the moving staircases, followed more sedately by Merlin and the newly reborn Dennis Dolohov.

“Will he be okay with that thing?” Dennis asked Merlin, frowning a little.

Merlin merely smiled and clacked his staff on the steps as he climbed. Unnoticed, a jet of lime green sparks shot from the tip, swirling and glowing like fireflies in their wake.



21. THE GIFT OF THE GREEN BOX

The last weeks of the school year spun out before James like a blur, remarkably free of deathly peril and adventure, but packed nonetheless with the lesser stresses of schoolwork and final essays and wand practicals, all of which were relatively welcome in the wake of the Hall of Elders’ Crossing. To no one’s great surprise, Hufflepuff was awarded the House Cup, being the only house to avoid major point deductions for involvement in the various Merlin conspiracy skullduggeries. The broomstick caper alone had cost Ravenclaw and Gryffindor fifty points each.

On the morning of the last day of school, James was stuffing his books and extra school robes into his trunk when Noah pounded up the stairs calling for him.

“Ron Weasley’s in the fireplace. He wants to talk to you.”

James grinned. “Excellent! Tell him I’ll be right there!”

“James, look at you!” Uncle Ron cried when James tromped down the stairs a minute later, still tying his tie. “All respectable and everything. Have a good year, did you?”

James nodded. “I guess I did. Looks like I’ll pass, after all. Spent all of Monday night getting ready for Franklyn’s D.A.D.A. practical, then had the most horrible sensation that I’d forgotten everything five minutes before the test.”

“I wasn’t exactly talking about your schoolwork, you dunce,” said the face in the embers, grinning crookedly. “Your dad told me all about the Merlin conspiracy you uncovered. That’s brilliant stuff, and no mistake.”

“Yeah, well...,” James said sheepishly, “it was all pretty exciting there for a while, but it’s weird. Five weeks of schoolwork and suddenly all of that seems like it happened to someone else.”

That’s the way of it,” Ron nodded. “The dull parts of life spread out in your memory and crowd out the exciting parts until they just seem like little flashes. It’s the way your brain copes with it all, I guess. Speaking of which, how’s Professor Jackson doing?”

James rolled his eyes. “Nothing can keep old Stonewall down for long. He wasn’t really injured in his duel with Delacroix, even though his backup wand wasn’t as powerful as the one she broke. Apparently, he chased her through the woods for hours and finally cornered her in a clearing. He says he’d have gotten her, except that she cheated, calling on the enemy naiads and dryads to fight with her. The trees attacked him from behind, knocking him out. That’s how he got the big bruise on his forehead. Still, he was back in class the day after Prescott left, and he’s been raining fire on Zane and me ever since.”

Ron raised an eyebrow. “Can’t really blame him, I guess.”

“We gave him back his briefcase and apologized and everything. I mean, I know we ruined his lifelong quest to protect the relic robe and prevent the return of the most dangerous wizard of all time and all, but come on. Merlin turned out to be all right. Delacroix got sent back to the States to stand trial in the American wizarding courts. Everything worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

“All I can say is if *I* was him, I’d wish you spiders in your drawers for the rest of your life,” Ron mused. “But that’s just me. My mind tends to go that way.”

“Honestly, Uncle Ron. I want to make it right. I *liked* Professor Jackson at first.”

“At the risk of sounding like a responsible adult, James, actions have consequences. Apologizing is great, but ‘sorry’ isn’t a magic word. You not only ruined Jackson’s plans, you took a stab at his pride. You

succeeded in foiling him. In his mind, you made a fool out of him. That's a hard thing for a bloke like him to get over. Frankly, you can't blame him, can you?"

"I guess not," James agreed sulkily. "At least he didn't fail us in Technomancy. It was a close thing, though."

"Good man. Still, don't get too wrapped up in classwork, you. You've got a reputation to live up to."

"Or down to," Noah's voice quipped from nearby.

"I heard that, Metzker," Ron said sternly. "It's a proud Potter tradition, squeaking by in school. Started with James Potter the first. Besides, you're one to talk, Mr. Gremlin."

"Got high marks this year, all across the board," Noah said primly.

Ron grinned again. "Thanks to your friend Petra, no doubt. She's to you Gremlins what Hermione was for Harry and me. Hold on. She wants to say hello, James."

The face in the coals sank out of sight. A moment later, Hermione's pleasant smile and perpetually bushy hair formed. "James, you look very handsome," she said proudly. "Don't you listen to your uncle. He studied plenty and was just as worried about marks as anyone."

"That's not true!" a muffled voice called from the depths of the fireplace. Hermione grimaced.

"Well, *almost* anyone," she conceded. "Anyway, your mum and dad will be very proud of you, and so are your uncle and me. Oh, I just can't believe how fast the time goes. It seems like only yesterday that we were all still there," she sighed, looking around the common room. "It looks almost exactly the same. We'll have to make a point of visiting next year. It'll be nice to see the old place again." Even in the embers, Aunt Hermione's eyes glistened a little. She blinked, and then returned her gaze to James. "Anyway, James. Ron's been talking to your father, you know, and the two of them wanted to ask you something. I thought it'd be best if someone besides either of them brought it up, though, because, frankly, they're both so silly about it that they'd influence your response."

"What is it?" James asked, squatting down in front of the fireplace.

"Don't kneel," Hermione chided automatically. "You'll scuff up your pants with ash. It's about the Headmistress. She's planning to retire, you know."

James didn't know. "She is? But... what would she do with herself?"

Hermione gave James a look that said she'd just remembered how old he was. "Minerva McGonagall has quite a life outside the walls of Hogwarts, James, as difficult as that may be for you believe. She's even, I understand, taken Mr. Finney up on his offer of dinner in London."

“She did?” James hooted.

“She did?” Noah chimed almost simultaneously from the couch, looking up from a book.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It was a purely professional meeting, I can assure you both. She performed a few minor memory modifications upon Mr. Finney, not really causing him to forget his visit here, but altering it. It’s all a part of Mr. Dolohov’s programme to ‘clean’--as he calls it--the school’s security record. Still,” Hermione added, lowering her voice a bit, “she did speak rather highly of Mr. Finney. It would be quite nice to think that she might find a, er, *companion* for herself. After all...”

“Hermione!” Ron’s voice barked from the depths of the fireplace again.

“Anyway,” Hermione said, turning businesslike. “Yes, the Headmistress does plan to retire, possibly as soon as this summer, assuming a suitable replacement could be found. Most likely, she will stay on to teach Transfiguration and help the new headmaster, whoever he or she might be. Some had suggested Neville Longbottom, but the Ministry feels he might be a bit young for the post, which is just silly, but politics being what they are...”

“Merlin!” James exclaimed. “You’re all thinking of asking him to be the new headmaster!”

A whoop of happy triumph emanated from the depths of the fireplace. Hermione scowled.

“You can leave *me* out of this, thank you very much. This is all your father’s and uncle’s idea. But I can see you are as mad about it as they are.”

“But how can he be the headmaster?” Noah asked, jumping off the couch and crouching in front of the fireplace. “Sorry,” he added quickly. “Couldn’t help overhearing and all that.”

“Really?” Hermione replied a bit archly. “Here, I had assumed you were suitably entrenched in that Arithmancy textbook. How silly of me. Please do keep it a secret, though, the both of you. Oh, what am I saying? Ron, you might as well explain this.” She sighed and blew her bangs out of her face in a gesture James remembered from his earliest memories of Aunt Hermione. She gave a bemused smile. “James, have a good trip. We’ll see you in a week. Rose and Hugo say hello and to buy them some Cauldron Cakes on the train. Good day, Noah.”

She disappeared from the embers and Uncle Ron’s face appeared again. “Excellent idea, eh?” he announced, looking from Noah to James enthusiastically.

“But how?” Noah asked again. “I mean, the bloke was the most potentially dangerous wizard in the history of the planet a few weeks ago, wasn’t he? And now you think the Ministry will put him in charge of a bunch of kids?”

“Not without lots of oversight,” Ron said quickly. He had obviously thought a lot about it. “That’s where McGonagall and Neville come in. They’ll watch him and help out, sort of like a board of directors.

McGonagall has already agreed to it, although we had to push her a bit on it. She's afraid she'll still basically be doing all the work, but with Merlin getting the credit. Might happen, too, I guess, but your dad and I don't think so. Merlin seems the sort of guy born to lead, you know?"

"Yeah," James agreed. "But still, he comes from a time when leading meant telling people which guillotine had the shortest queue. I can't imagine that the Ministry will agree to put him in charge of Hogwarts."

"Your Merlin's a surprisingly quick study, James," Ron said seriously. "He's already been all over the Ministry, meeting people and having big, long discussions about the way things work in this day and age. He's warming up to it, I have to say!"

"So why wouldn't they put him somewhere there, then?" Noah asked. "I mean, most famous wizard in the world and all. Seems like he'd be in line for Minister of Magic, if nothing else."

Ron grinned a bit maliciously. "I suppose you are both too young to understand the implications of the phrase 'overqualified and underexperienced'. Basically, no department wants him. A guy like Merlin doesn't work well behind a desk, for one thing. And it's hard to imagine that any department head who hired him would stay the department head for very long afterwards."

"You mean he'd take over, right?" James confirmed.

"Take over, at the very least. He's a bit of a loose cannon. Sure, he's probably the most powerful single wizard alive today, but with a thousand-year gap in his work experience. As fast as he picks things up, he's sure to be a poor fit in the red tape world of the Ministry. Your *dad* can hardly stand it, James. Think about what it'll be like for a bloke who's used to being able to banish his enemies to the netherworld with a glance. The fact of the matter is that the Ministry is looking for an out-of-the-way place to stick the old man. Someplace prominent enough to fit a wizard of his stature, but far enough away not to threaten anyone, metaphorically speaking. Or maybe even *not* metaphorically speaking. One never knows."

"And Hogwarts just happens to be in need of a new headmaster," Noah said, grinning.

"Well?" Ron said, meeting Noah's grin. "It does seem a little too perfect, doesn't it?"

"Even if the Ministry does agree to it, you think he'll do it?" James asked.

In the fireplace, Ron seemed to shrug. "Who can tell? Nobody has asked him yet. But first thing's first." Ron grew serious and studied James. "You know him best, nephew. You were there when he came out of the past. You were the one who talked him into coming and helping Hogwarts and the wizarding world. What do you think? Do you think he'd be a good headmaster? Do *you* think we should ask him?"

Noah leaned back against the base of the couch, looking at James, waiting for his response. James knew he should think about it, but he already knew his answer. Merlin was a complicated man, and he wasn't exactly what anyone could call 'good', not in the sense that Albus Dumbledore or even Minerva

McGonagall were good. But James knew one thing for sure: Merlin *wanted* to be good. It was hard to tell if it was better to have a headmaster who was good by nature or one that was good because he had to try to be so every day, but James was old enough to know that it was a risk worth taking. *Besides*, the Gremlin part of James whispered, *it might be fun having a headmaster who'd banish someone like Tabitha Corsica to the netherworld with a glance.*

"Ask him," James said, nodding once, emphatically. "If the Ministry goes for it, ask him. And I hope he accepts."

"Woo hoo!" Noah hooted, throwing his hands in the air.

"Keep it to yourselves, for now," Ron said sternly. "If word gets out before your dad and Hermione arrange things at the Ministry, it could spoil everything. Got it?"

Noah nodded. James smiled agreement.

"Your dad took back the cloak and the map, did he?" Ron asked James, changing the subject.

"Yeah. And I'm apparently going to be grounded when I get back. Two weeks off my broom."

Ron clucked his tongue. "Just when you were getting pretty good on it, I hear. Ah well. You know your dad has to keep up the look of the thing, punishing you and all, but he's proud of you. Take it from me."

James' smile widened and his cheeks flushed.

"Not that I'd try it again, mind you," Ron said, his grin vanishing. "Once is a charm. If you pull something like that again, Ginny will probably decide to home school you in the basement. Take it from me, she's no one to fiddle with, James."



Later that afternoon, James met Zane and Ralph outside as the Alma Alerons gathered to disembark. As they watched, the three flying vehicles were driven out of the Garage, and then the Garage was broken down and packed inside the trunk of the Dodge Hornet.

“There’s something deep and mystical about that, but I can’t quite put my finger on it,” Zane said thoughtfully.

“What? The Garage being packed into what it was housing a few minutes ago?”

“No. The way Professor Franklyn seems to get more and more popular with the girls the closer it gets to his departure.” It was true. Franklyn was quite popular with the ladies, from the oldest staff matron to the first-year girls, who giggled when he passed them, touching each lightly on the head. The only women he seemed to have no effect on were the Headmistress and Victoire, who claimed to believe he was a pompous old blowhard. Ted had explained that one of the benefits of being old was being free to flirt with any girl you wanted, because none of them took you serious enough to get offended. Zane found this remarkably instructive.

“When I get old, I’m going to flirt like that,” he said wistfully.

“He’s not even flirting,” James said, narrowing his eyes. “He’s just smiling at them and acting all self-effacing, like he always does.”

“That just shows what *you* know about flirting.”

Ralph rolled his eyes. “I’m surprised you aren’t taking notes.”

“He should offer a class,” Zane said seriously, watching Franklyn bow and kiss Petra Morganstern’s hand goodbye. Petra grinned and glanced aside, her cheeks reddening a little. When Franklyn straightened, she leaned in and gave him a chaste little peck on the cheek.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Hogwarts,” he said, turning to address the crowd, “it has been our distinct pleasure to serve you this year. It has been, as I knew it would be, a remarkably instructive year for us. We have strengthened our resolve to work with the European magical community to maintain fairness and equity worldwide, not only for the magical world, but for all humanity.” He scanned the crowd, beaming, and then took off his glasses and sighed. “We are, I suspect, at the beginning of challenging times. The winds of change are blowing. On both sides of the ocean, we face forces that would shake our culture to its foundations. But we have made friends, you and us, and united we will stand, regardless of what may come. I have been around for a very long time, and I can say with some degree of confidence that change is *always* in the wind. The challenge of good men is not to thwart change, but to mold it as it comes, so that it may benefit rather than destroy. After this year, I am indeed confident that we may succeed in that endeavor.”

There was a round of applause, although it felt to James a little perfunctory. Not everyone in the crowd agreed with Franklyn, and not all for the same reasons. Still, it had been a good speech, and James was glad Franklyn had made it. While the crowd was still cheering, Franklyn climbed into the Volkswagen Beetle. He waved once from the open door.

Someone tapped James on the shoulder. He turned, and then had to look up. Professor Jackson was standing behind him. Tall and dressed in black, Jackson looked more imposing than ever. He looked down his nose at James, his bushy brows low.

“I thought you might wish to have this,” Jackson said. James noticed that the man was holding a small wooden box. Jackson looked at it in his hands, and then handed it to James. “It was found in Madame Delacroix’s quarters. I believe it belongs to you more than it does to anyone. Dispose of it as you see fit.”

James held the box, which was surprisingly light. It was a strange greenish color, covered in deep, carven scrollwork. It reminded him of the vines on the door of the Grotto Keep. He looked up to ask Professor Jackson what it was, but the man was already striding across the courtyard toward the Stutz Dragonfly. He stopped when he reached the vehicle, and then turned, raising one hand to the assembly, his face as stony as his nickname. The crowd cheered, a much longer and more sustained ovation than even Franklyn had received. Surprisingly, Jackson had become a favorite at Hogwarts, not so much in spite of his curmudgeon-like demeanor as because of it.

Once Jackson had climbed into the vehicle, the rest of the assembly boarded quickly. The grey-cloaked delegates from the American Department of Magical Administration had arrived from London the day before to join their fellows for the trip back to the States. They filed into the vehicles, nodding goodbyes to the assembly. Last were the porters, who packed the enormous pile of luggage into the apparently bottomless trunks of the vehicles, and then climbed into the front seats to drive.

The wings unfolded from the vehicles smoothly, delicately, and began to thrash the air. The Dodge Hornet took off first. With a squeak of springs and creak of metal, it rose into the air, turning slowly. The Stutz Dragonfly and the Volkswagen Beetle followed, the low drone of their wings beating the air and rippling the grass of the courtyard. Then, with sudden grace and speed, they raced off, rising, their noses tilted toward the ground. In less than a minute, the noise of their departure was lost in the late spring wind that blew over the hills.

Ralph, Zane, and James plopped onto a bench near the courtyard entrance.

“So what’s in the box Jackson gave you?” Ralph asked, peering curiously at it.

“I wouldn’t even open it, if I was you,” Zane warned. “Remember what he said about making our lives ‘interesting’? He’s the kind of guy to wait right until the moment he leaves to get his revenge on you. That way, he’s gone when the trouble starts.” He tapped the side of his head wisely.

James frowned and shook his head slowly. He looked at the box on his lap. It had a brass latch on the front, holding the lid shut. Without a word, he flipped the catch and raised the lid. Zane and Ralph leaned in, craning to see. The inside of the box was lined with purple velvet. There was one object inside, lying atop a piece of folded parchment.

“I don’t get it,” Ralph said, sitting back again. “It’s a doll.”

James removed it and held it up. It was indeed a small figure, roughly made of burlap and twine, with mismatched buttons for eyes.

Zane peered at it, his face serious. "It's... it's you, James."

Sure enough, the figure did bear a striking resemblance. Black yarn on the head formed a good representation of James' unruly hair. Even the shape of the head, the line of the stitched mouth, and the placement of the button eyes made an eerie portrait.

James shuddered. "It's a voodoo doll," he said. He remembered the note inside the box. All three boys leaned in to read it as he unfolded it.

Mr. Potter,

You will surely recognize what this object is. There was no time in this year's Technomancy curriculum to discuss the ancient art of Representational Harmonics, but I suspect you grasp the implications. This was found inside Madame Delacroix's quarters. After some discussion with the Headmistress and the portraits of your Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore--whom you should know have taken rather an interest in you--it was determined that you might benefit from knowing how Madame Delacroix used this object against you. The elegance of her manipulation was quite impressive, really. This figure was placed next to a much larger figure of your father, Harry Potter. On the other side of that was a candle. It seems apparent that she kept that candle lit at all times. The result, of course, Mr. Potter, was that your figure was always in the shadow of the representation of your father.

There is always a grain of truth in the manipulations of the voodoo art. Delacroix knew that you would legitimately struggle with the expectations of your legendary father. The lesson you must learn from this, Mr. Potter, is that emotions are not bad, but they must be examined. Know yourself. Feelings always seem valid, but they can confuse. And they can, as you have seen, be used against you. I repeat, as your teacher and as your elder, know your feelings. Master them or they will master you.

Theodore Hirshall Jackson

"Wow!" Ralph breathed. "We didn't call her 'the voodoo queen' for nothing!"

Zane asked, "What are you going to do with it, James? I mean, if you destroy it, will you be destroyed, somehow?"

James stared at the small, unattractive caricature of himself. “I don’t think so,” he replied thoughtfully. “I don’t think Jackson would’ve given it to me in that case. I think he just means for me to remember what happened. And to try to make sure it never happens again.”

“So?” Zane repeated. “What are you going to do with it?”

James stood, stuffing the doll into the pocket of his jeans. “I don’t know. I think I’ll keep it. For a while, at least.”

With that, the three boys meandered into the school, intent on doing as little as possible with their last day of the school year.

Late that night, unable to sleep from the excitement of the next day’s departure, James got out of bed. He crept down the stairs into the common room, hoping someone else might still be up for a game of wizard chess or even Winkles and Augers. By the glow of the banked fire, the room appeared to be empty. As he was turning away, something caught James’ eye and he looked again. The ghost of Cedric Diggory sat near the fire. His silvery form was still transparent, but was noticeably more solid than the last time James had seen him.

“I was trying to think of a name for myself,” Cedric said, smiling as James threw himself onto the couch nearby.

“You’ve got a name already, haven’t you?” James answered.

“Well, not a proper ghostly name. Not like ‘Nearly Headless Nick’ or ‘the Bloody Baron’. I need something with some panache.”

James considered it. “How about ‘the Chaser of Annoying Muggles?’”

“It’s a little long.”

“Well, can you do any better?”

“I was thinking--you’d better not laugh,” the ghost said, giving James a stern look. “I was thinking of something like ‘the Specter of Silence’.”

“Hmm,” James replied carefully. “But you aren’t silent. In fact, you sound a lot better now. Your voice doesn’t sound like its being blown in from the Great Beyond anymore.”

“Yeah,” Cedric agreed, “I’ve become quite a bit more... here, sort of. I’m as ghostly as the rest of the school ghosts, now. I was silent for a long time, though, wasn’t I?”

“I guess so. But still, with a name like ‘the Specter of Silence’,” James said doubtfully, “it’s going to be hard to make that stick if you go around chatting people up all the time.”

“Maybe I could be all broody and quiet a lot of the time,” Cedric mused. “Just do a lot of floating around and looking dour and everything. And then, when I pass by, people would whisper to each other, ‘Hey, there he goes! The Specter of Silence!’”

James shrugged. “It’s worth a shot. I guess you have the summer to practice the whole brooding silence bit.”

“I guess so.”

James suddenly sat up. “So do you think you’ll be the new Gryffindor ghost?” he asked. “I mean, with Nearly Headless Nick gone on to wherever ghosts go, we don’t have a House ghost anymore.”

Cedric thought for a moment. “I don’t think so, really. Sorry. I was a Hufflepuff, remember?”

James slumped back. “Yeah. I forgot.”

A few minutes went by, and then Cedric spoke again. “That was a pretty great thing you did, going out and calling Merlin back to help us out when it seemed like he’d left for good.”

James lifted his head and looked at the ghost. He frowned a little. “That? Well, it was just a shot in the dark, really. It was all my fault Merlin was brought to this time at all. I thought I was doing the world this big favor, standing in the way of Delacroix’s and Jackson’s evil plan. Turns out she was using me all along and Jackson was actually a good guy.”

“Well?” Cedric countered. “You learned something, then, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know,” James said automatically. He thought for a moment and then added, “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“There is one way that you and your dad are one and the same, James,” Cedric said.

James laughed a little humorlessly. “I can’t see what it is. All I learned is that my way of doing things isn’t Dad’s. If I try to do it his way, I screw everything up. If I try to do it my way, I might help things scrape by on sheer luck. Dad’s way was the way of the hero. My way is the way of the manager. My best talent is asking for help.”

“No, James,” Cedric said, leaning forward to look James directly in the eye, “your best talent is inspiring people to *want* to help. You think that’s no big deal? The world needs people like you, because most of the people out there don’t have the courage or the passion or the direction to be heroes. They *want* to be, but they need someone to tell them *why*, and to show them *how*. You have that gift, James. Your dad was a hero because he was the Boy Who Lived. He had a destiny. It wasn’t an easy road for him, but it was an *obvious* road. There was Harry and there was Voldemort. He knew where he stood and what he had to do, even if it killed him. You, though... you are a hero because you choose to be one, every day. And you have the talent to encourage others to choose that, too.”

James stared into the banked coals of the fire. "I'm no hero."

Cedric smiled and sat back again. "You only think that because you think heroes always win. Trust me on this one, James. A hero isn't defined by winning. Loads of heroes die in the effort. Most of them never get any recognition. No, a hero is just somebody who does the right thing when it would be far, far easier to do nothing."

James turned to look at the ghost, smiling crookedly. "Maybe we should call you 'the Specter of Cheesiness.'"

"Ha, ha," the ghost replied.

James stood up again. "Thanks, Cedric. That... helps."

Cedric nodded. James headed back for the stairs, but stopped with his foot on the bottom step. "One thing still bothers me, though, Cedric. Maybe you know something about it, being a ghost and all."

"Maybe. Ask me."

"The dryad in the forest said that there was an heir of Voldemort. She said that this person was alive and nearby, right here on the school grounds."

Cedric nodded slowly. "I was there when you told Snape about it."

"Well, whoever that is, I think that's who took Ralph's GameDeck and used the name Austramaddux. If that hadn't happened, none of this would've come about. Whoever it is had to have been working with Miss Sacarhina from the very beginning."

Cedric looked away, out a nearby window. "You think you know who it is?"

"Tabitha Corsica," James said flatly. "I thought it might be her after I talked to Snape and I *still* think it could be her. So her broom wasn't the Merlin staff. There's still something scary about it. *And* about her in general."

Cedric stood and walked through the chair, apparently without noticing he was doing so. "I've felt something, James. I'll admit that to you. There is a sense of He Who Must Not Be Named here still. It lingers within the halls. It's like a smell, like something rancid and oozing and... purple, somehow. Maybe I am more sensitive to it than the other ghosts. After all, he was responsible for my death."

"Yeah," James said quietly. "I hadn't forgotten."

"But James, things are rarely as obvious as we'd like to think they are. In the real world, at least in our time, if not in Merlin's, evil wears many masks. It's confusing. You have to be very careful. Sometimes, even good people can look bad. A lot of us, your father included, made that mistake when it came to Professor Snape."

“So did I,” James admitted. “With Professor Jackson.”

Cedric nodded.

“But I would’ve sworn that Tabitha was involved in the whole Merlin conspiracy. What do you think the real story is with her and her broom?”

Cedric looked at James for a long moment, studying him. “Did it ever occur to you that her broom might be exactly what she says it is?”

“What?” James scoffed. “A ‘Muggle artifact’? That’s just a ruse she came up with, isn’t it?”

Cedric shrugged, but it looked more like the shrug of someone who knows more than he intends to tell. “The scariest people in the world are not always the ones who are bent on evil, James. Sometimes, the scariest person is the one who mistakes their own lies for the truth.”

James blinked. “You mean... Tabitha Corsica *believes* all that stuff she said in the debate? About Voldemort actually being a good guy? That he was squashed by the Ministry and the magical ruling class because they couldn’t have him changing the status quo? She can’t *really* believe that, can she?”

Cedric looked back at James, and then sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know. But I do know that lots of people *do* believe it. And she seems pretty sincere about it. That broom of hers may have some scary mojo built into it, but it’s nothing compared to the dark magic someone might conjure if their heart is crooked enough to twist a lie into something they believe is truth.”

As James climbed quietly back into his bed, his mind raced. He had never even considered that Tabitha Corsica might believe the things she said. He had assumed that she was supporting the Progressive Element propaganda because she fully accepted and endorsed their ultimate, dark goals. For a moment, he felt vaguely sorry for her. It was awful to think that someone like her might believe she was morally in the right, and that he, James Potter, and his father, were the evil ones. It was almost unthinkable, but not entirely. Outside, the moon was full and bright. James fell asleep with its beams on his face, pale and cool, his brow still slightly furrowed.

The next day, James, Zane, and Ralph rode the Hogwarts Express back to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. Zane’s parents were there, along with his younger sister, Greer, who watched the gigantic crimson engine with naked awe. Standing near them, James spied his mum and dad, herding Albus and Lily along with them. He grinned and waved. It felt like hardly a week ago that he’d watched them from the train as it had pulled out of the station, carrying him to the uncertainty of his first year at Hogwarts. Now he was home again. Hogwarts was wonderful, he thought to himself, but he was glad to be back, after all. Next year, he’d be accompanying Albus on the train, taking him to *his* first year. He’d tease Albus endlessly about what house he’d end up in. It was going to be his summer’s project, in fact. But he wasn’t worried about it. Even if Albus wasn’t a Gryffindor, he’d be okay. James knew that if Albus was indeed sent to another house, part of him, James, would even be a little jealous of him. But only just a little.

As he joined the throng exiting the train, James fell in behind Ted. Ted, James noticed, was holding Victoire's hand.

"You're going to cause a load of trouble, you know," James said, grinning.

"It's a tough job, being this controversial," Ted said humbly, "but we all have our burdens to bear."

"My parents must not see us together," Victoire commanded. "Ted Lupin, don't you ruin everything. You know they won't approve. You will keep your mouth shut, too, James."

"Her accent is much more prominent when she's harping, isn't it?" Ted asked James.

James grinned. It was true.

James stopped inside the open door of the train, looking about the platform. Through the crowd of returning students, bustling porters and yelling family members, he saw Zane engulfed in the mutual hug of his pretty blonde mother and his tall, proud father. His sister was sucked into the embrace, as if against her will, happy to see her brother again but still enthralled by the crimson train. Ralph met his dad on the platform with a more restrained hug, both grinning a bit sheepishly. Ralph glanced back up at James and waved.

"Dad says we'll be spending the summer in London! I'll be able to come and visit!"

"Excellent!" James yelled back happily.

And then, as he climbed down, James saw his own family watching for him. In the moment before they caught sight of him, James savored his own happiness. This was indeed home. He ran toward them, patting his jeans pocket to make sure the little doll Madame Delacroix had made of him was still there. It probably wouldn't mean anything, but there was no harm in it. No harm at all.

"James!" Albus cried, seeing him first. "Did you bring us anything? You promised!"

"What am I? Father Christmas?" James answered, laughing as Albus and Lily nearly bowled him over.

"You promised! You promised us Licorice Wands from the cart lady!"

"And Cauldron Cakes for Rose and Hugo," Harry added, grinning.

"Wow, word sure travels fast. All right, all right, I've got stuff for everybody!" James admitted. He emptied his pockets, filling Albus' and Lily's hands with sweets. He pulled the voodoo doll out last and looked at it a bit uncertainly.

"What in the world is that, James?" Ginny said, embracing him and then looking at the object in her son's hands. "It looks like... well, you!"

James' face broke into a grin. "It's for you, Mum. I thought you'd like to keep it when I went off to school next year. You know, to remember me by."

Ginny looked at it quizzically, and then glanced up at Harry. He shrugged and smiled. "Well, it's a bit odd, but all right," she said, taking the doll from him. "If I hug it, will you feel it?"

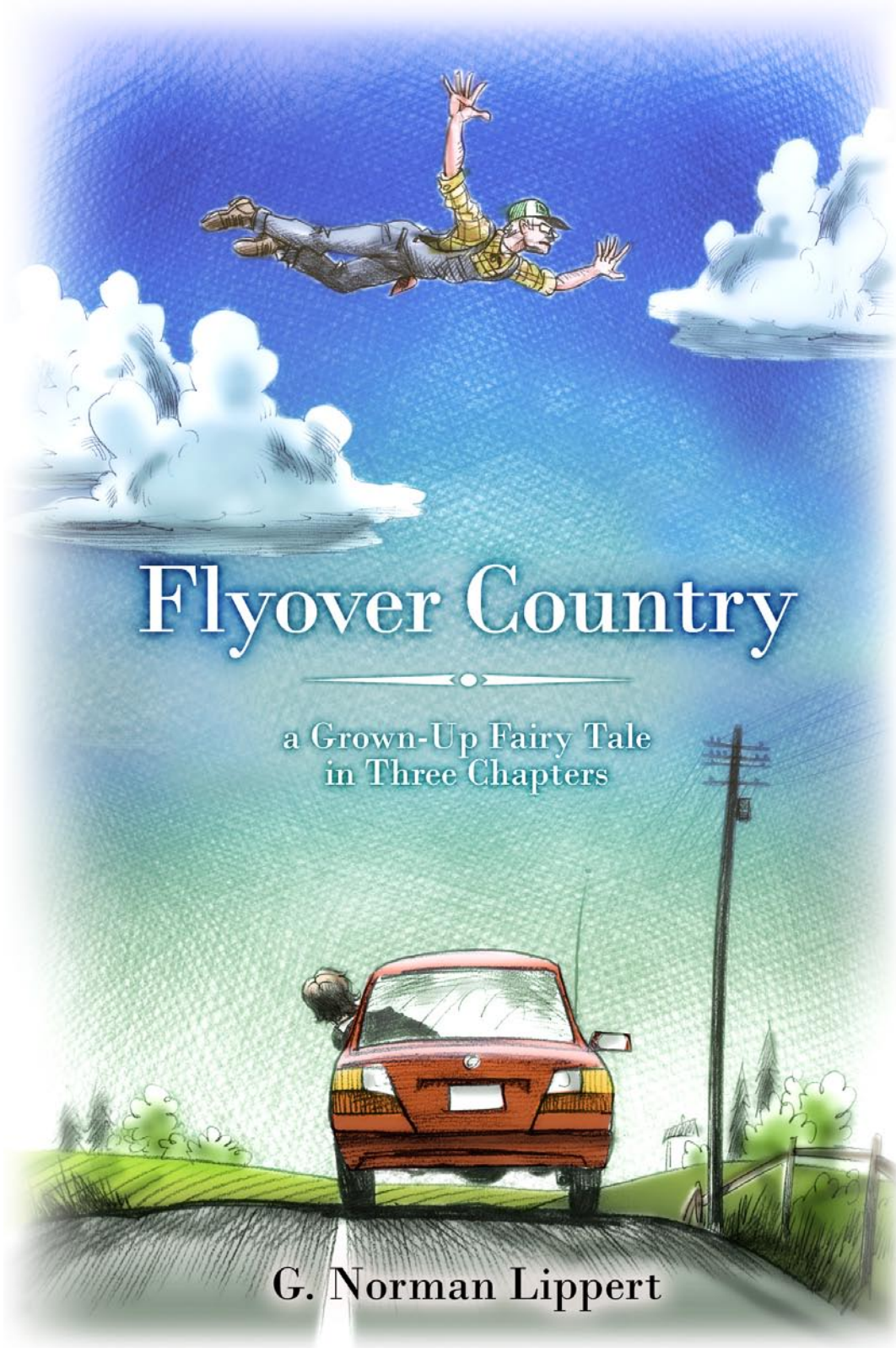
James shrugged, effecting disinterest as the family began to make their way into the main terminal. "I don't know. Whatever. It's... you know, worth a try, I suppose."

Ginny nodded, smiling and throwing a glance at Harry. She gave it a try.

THE END

If you liked *James Potter and the Hall of Elders' Crossing* and wish to support the author (as well as any potential sequels), then you may also enjoy this excerpt of his original novella, *Flyover Country*.

Flyover Country is available from www.lulu.com in hardcover or as a PDF download.



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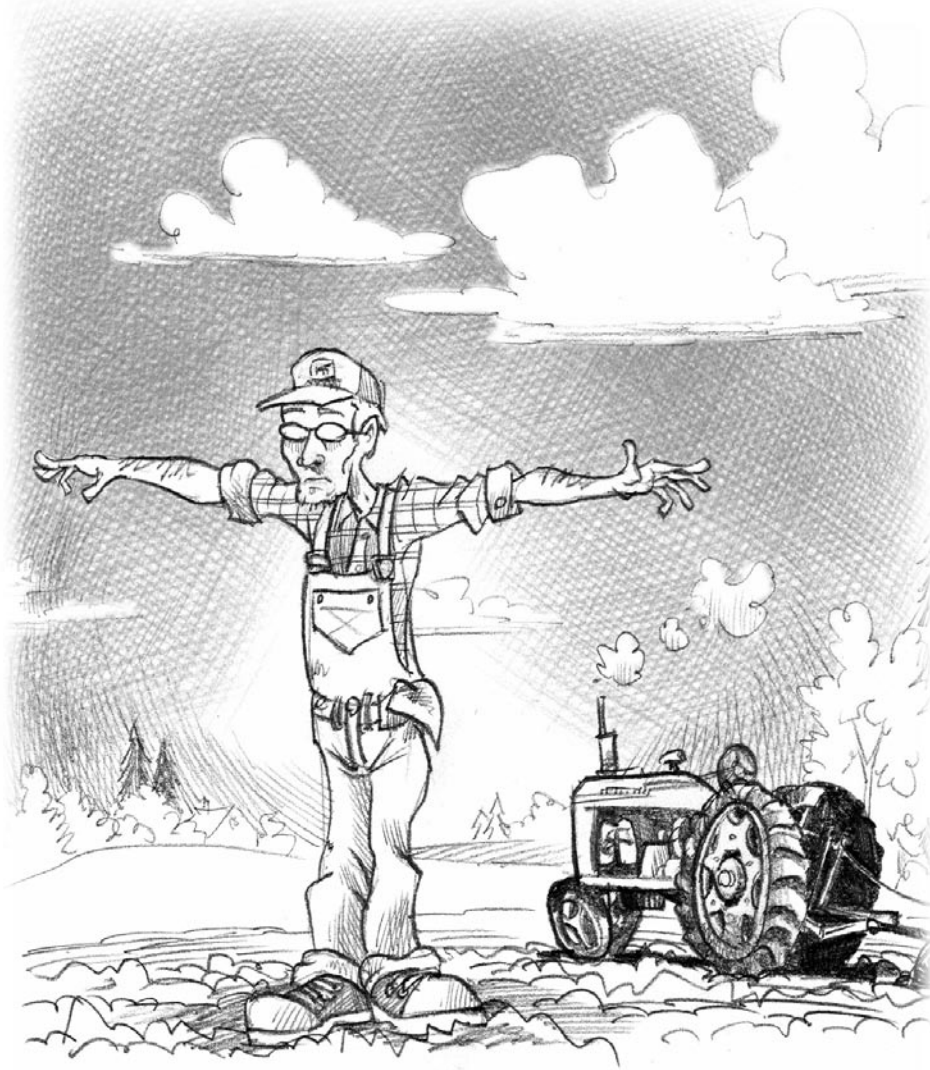
One

Clete was out in east field when the idea first came to him.

It was an unseasonably hot day for early May. A restless breeze shushed in the birches and oaks along the edge of the field. When Clete set out that morning, the sun had only been a rosy promise on the lip of a pristine, sapphire sky, still dotted with crisp, morning stars. Now she was a hot diamond directly over his head, her jaunty rays warming his back and careening off the narrow hood of his old Farm-all tractor. The heat buzzed in his old joints, limbering them like oil after the long winter.

The idea just came to him, fresh and plain, straight out of the clear blue sky. Perhaps it was the sun, beating down on him giddily after so many long, drab months. Perhaps it was just the monotony of the plowing. After all, anyone who has ever mowed a good-sized lawn on a hot day knows the imaginative, half-dreaming state that the bored mind can achieve, the interesting ideas it can concoct when left to boil on the back-burner of tedium. Perhaps it had been merely a remnant of some forgotten night's dreaming. In any case, Cletus Arvil Starcher was not normally a man given to pursuing random flights of fancy. When the idea struck him, it seemed simply plausible and reasonable, perfectly worthy of a quick test. No harm in that.

He braked the Farm-all, joggled the gear-shift into neutral, and lowered



himself to the ground. The earth was broken up in clods of rich brown, crumbling amiably under his Redwing boots. Clete moved a few paces away from the tractor so to escape the chug of diesel fumes, and took a deep pull of the spring air. It was full of the scent of moist earth laid open, and the creek swollen with winter run-off, and tender green shoots along its steep banks. His stomach growled congenially, reminding him of the lunch Rachel was probably cooking right now: pork chops and sweet potatoes and canned beets. He half thought he could smell her cooking on the warm breeze, under all the other, earthy scents, but he knew that was impossible. He was half a mile from the house now, in the middle of the east field. He frowned in contentment, reminded himself that idleness was the sport of fools, and got on with what he was doing.

Clete spread out his arms on either side of him, palms flat to the earth, testing the air as if it were a solid thing, and began to pump them slowly up and down. He studied the broken dirt about eight feet in front of his boots, still frowning with a mixture of thoughtfulness and quiet concentration. The worn flannel of his shirt pulled out of the sides of his overalls, billowing slightly under his arms as they rose and fell, rose and fell. Clete spread his fingers slightly, allowing the mid-day air to channel through them. He tested the resistance, shifting the distance between each finger until the breeze seemed to press through them like fluid. He began to pump faster, frowning studiously, his eyes locked calmly under the bill of his green John Deere cap, still studying the freshly plowed earth before him. Behind him, the dull red of the Farm-all soaked up the sun, chugging obliviously. The trees lining the field shushed and busied themselves in the wash of breeze, waving their budded branches as if proud of them. And slowly, deliberately, Clete began to rise from the ground.

He could feel the air as it whipped around him, flicking like the tail of an affronted lion. It streamed through his fingers first like running water, then like heavy cream, and finally like syrup. At first he found that it was easier to stand if he allowed his heels to lift off the crumbly dirt. He balanced easily on the steel toes of his worn leather boots. An observer might have thought he looked like a novice ballerina, toe-standing for the first time, flapping her arms to keep her balance. That observer, had there been one, might have laughed out loud at the sight, since Clete, in his overalls and work shirt, with his old man's face and wire rimmed glasses under the curved brim of his mesh cap, was about as close to a ballerina as Jupiter is to a Junior Mint. The illusion, however, would have been short-lived, for after only five seconds of tentative balancing, Clete's toes gently but unmistakably left the ground.

A scatter of dead leaves swirled beneath him, retreating along the length of a deep furrow. Clete was still frowning with calm concentration, still staring at that section of plowed dirt, now one foot lower than it had been. In his carefully ordered old farmer's mind a mild voice commented that it was working. 'It' was apparently the simple act of flying. The voice commented on it the way one would comment about a light unpredicted rain or an unseasonably hot day in May. Then another voice, still in his mind but entirely different than the first, rang out stridently. Clete thought it was the voice of his long-departed mother. *Cletus Starcher! Just what do you think you're doing up there? Come down this instant!*

And the spell- if that was what it was- broke. Clete's arms flailed instead of flapped. His fingers clawed the air and lost their tenuous grip. That strange, fibrous quality of the breeze vanished, and in an instant the plowed field leapt up to reclaim him.

He landed smartly, his boots in two parallel furrows, and his knees popped like a double barreled cork-gun.

He straightened slowly and stared at the distant, heat shimmery horizon. What had he just been doing? He answered himself with the simple, unabashed honesty that had been the standard of his life so far. He had been flying. He frowned again, more animatedly, and raised his eyebrows.

"Who'd a thought it?" he remarked to himself.

After a moment's slightly distracted rumination, he turned back to the Farm-all, climbed up to the metal seat (which had soaked up a considerable amount of sun since he left it), stepped on the clutch and shifted back into gear.

Twenty minutes later he headed back to the house for lunch.

Clete didn't say anything to Rachel about the flying incident at lunch. In fact, by that evening, the thought of attempting to explain the event to her had hardly so much as crossed his mind. This wasn't because he thought she'd call him crazy. It wasn't even because he thought she wouldn't believe him. Neither of those considerations had occurred to him. Clete was a simple man. He hadn't told her because, basically, it didn't concern her. Perhaps if she had been his wife, he'd have mentioned it. Wives have a much more vested interest in the attitudes and lifestyles of a man than sisters do.

If Anne had still been alive, he would have told her. He probably wouldn't have said anything at lunch, in the middle of the day. She'd have had enough on her mind then, what with watching little Dennis and handling the laundry and thinking about dinner and all. But he'd have told her about it that evening, certainly. And most assuredly, he'd have told her before he made any attempt to try it again, as he was now. He'd have wanted her to know what he was doing before she saw him there on the south porch, flapping his arms like a scarecrow in a twister. It'd just be common courtesy.

Rachel, on the other hand, was different. Not different-bad, of course. Just different. Any man who has ever had a sister would know. Clete didn't tell Rachel.

He stood on the porch and looked contemplatively out over the fields and the scrubby trees beyond his barn. The great red structure was one of the secret prides of his life. It stood fifty-six feet tall from its cobblestone foundation to the beak of the wrought iron weather-cock, and it was just as straight and red as the day it had been built, back before Clete himself had even been born. The structure had four peaks, one on each side, and at the apex of those peaks, dead center above the building, was an old-fashioned vent-house reached only by a hand-made circular stairway at the edge of the hay loft. A few years back, the barn had even been featured in a magazine called *Country Living*. Clete remembered the photographer who had come out after the magazine people had called. He'd been a wiry young man with glasses, and his camera had been nearly as big as him. "So we can zoom right on up to that delightful bit of architecture at the top," the young man had explained. Clete offered to take the man up the winding stairway to the vent house, but the man

had declined somewhat hastily. Didn't like heights, Clete figured.

From the rear of the barn, he could hear the pigs in their pen, snorting and complaining over their dinner. Waves of stored warmth baked off the face of the house behind him, even as the sun dipped over the horizon and left the sky pale and sullen.

He had finished plowing the east field that day, and had gotten a good head start on the big loop that doglegged into Strecker woods as well. The Farm-all was now put away in the barn, along with the tiller, and the barn was neatly closed up. The swine had been fed, as had been the horses and Clete's lone milk cow, Bethel. Rachel was inside preparing an early dinner, listening to the local news on her ancient Philco transistor radio. Clete was satisfied that the time was right. He stepped away from the house and looked up.

The south porch was really just a patio, added by Clete's and Rachel's father some sixty years ago as a place to barbecue hogs for their occasional family reunions and Sunday School picnics. The brick barbecue had long fallen into an obscurity of hyacinth vines thanks to one of Rachel's beautification stints, but the patio itself had been claimed as one of Clete's personal evening areas. He had purchased a small redwood chair for the patio, and kept his pipe and tobacco in a small teak box beneath. Two and a half stories above the patio the peak of the roof protruded against the evening sky, tipped with a modest corner of white gingerbread. At the apex of the house's face, just under the old gingerbread, was a lit circular window. Clete had just come down from the attic and had purposely left the light on.

He turned back to the yard and dropped his gaze to the corner of the smoothed flagstone floor of the patio. Slowly and deliberately, as he had done in the field earlier that day, he stretched his arms out and began to move them. Up and down, up and down, first slowly and then with an increasing rhythm. Again, he felt that strange, perfect assurance come over him, just as it had in the east field when the idea first came to him. It made perfect sense. It was so simple that he was amazed he'd never thought of it before. One wasn't surprised, when he worked the pump lever, to see water stream out, was he? Or to find that the earth moves under him when he moves his feet in a walking motion? Of course not. So how could he have missed *this* before? This elementary, physical phenomenon of moving one's arms and achieving flight?

Yet he knew that it wasn't only physical. As he tested the air, feeling it like ephemeral harp strings under the musician's practiced hand, he could sense part of himself opening. It was like learning to whistle, or wiggle one's ears. He felt strange activity in his brain, as if he was using mental muscles that he had never before known how to flex.

And again, he felt the air thicken between his scissoring fingers. He felt it billow and fold under his cupped palms. He lifted tremulously to his toes and hovered there, his arms pumping swiftly, strongly. Air swirled in the bald vines of Rachel's hyacinth. He didn't know precisely how it

was working, but he could sense the knowledge of it in the back of his mind, huge and phantasmic. He could grope around the edges of it. It had to do with the friction between his arms and the air. And static charges. Not the kind that poked him when he climbed out of his truck on a dry autumn day, zapping between his fingers and the metal door, but an entirely different kind of static charge. One he could create. He created it by flapping, by producing that sort of humming resistance between the air and his fingers, but he created it also by thinking. Or not by thinking, exactly, but by exercising that odd, slippery, mental muscle in his brain. The one he was exercising now, carefully and diligently, frowning an old man's frown that would look more at home over a crossword puzzle or a misbehaving child.

Clete's feet scraped slightly on the sandy-smooth surface of the flagstones as he rose from the patio.

He achieved the same height he had earlier that day next to the chugging Farm-all, and then began to rise higher. His shadow separated from him and spread away into the yard, cast by the small yellow porch light. Clete knew instinctively that he must not look down, must not give notice to the distance between himself and the patio below. He had nearly sprained both knees earlier that day, falling only a distance of two feet. If he were to lose his concentration now, rising slowly past five feet, he would most certainly break one or both of his legs. The threat of this struck him only vaguely, however. He was flying. And strangely enough, as he arose past the glow of the porch light, he found it was becoming easier. He was approaching the second story of the house. The lights were off inside, but he could see just over the sill of Rachel's sewing room window. A pair of sharp-beaked sewing scissors and a spool of black thread sat on the sill, blue in the light of the evening sky.

The wooden screen door below opened with a startled squawk. Rachel appeared in the opening holding a Ball jar of sweet pickles. Clete glanced down sharply. He could see the top of her head, her steely hair pulled back in a bun. He could see yellow seeds swimming in the green soup of the pickle jar.

"Clete would you give this jar a yank for me? I can't seem to-"

She stopped in mid-sentence, realizing he wasn't in his redwood chair. His feet hung solidly in the air at about her eye-level, but off to the side.

"Clete, what..." she said, and then looked up. She saw his feet, clad in his evening shoes, standing firmly on nothing. She followed them upwards until her eyes met his, wide and serious.

"DearLordGodInHeaven!" she spat sharply, as if the phrase were all one syllable. Her entire body seemed to retract backwards, like a cuckoo bird being yanked back into its house. She disappeared through the door and it slapped dumbly shut behind her.

Clete credited her for not dropping the pickles.

She didn't come back out, so Clete decided to continue with his experiment. He floated higher, passing the sewing room window of the second floor and approaching the attic.

Slowly, he turned in the air, allowing himself to enjoy the sensation of weightlessness. Across the yard the barn was being gathered into dim violet shadows. He could see over the point of the stable, into the back corner of the pig pen now. There were no pigs to be seen, however. He knew they were all still busy at the trough, fighting over Rachel's potato skins and coffee grounds. Over the peak of the barn, Clete could just begin to see the hazy shape of Drake's woods and the reflected evening light of the pond. Normally, he could only see this far from the attic window. If he waited just a little while, when the night set fully, he would be able to see the pinprick glows of the city of Bastion Falls, just under the brim of the horizon.

Something hard and pointed bumped his back and he startled, almost losing the rhythm of his arms. He turned in the air and saw it was the peak of the roof. The apex of green shingles stretched away from him in the dim light, ending at the base of the brick chimney. Clete glanced down carefully. Between his feet, the patio looked like something painted on paper, distant and insignificant. The patio light still shone yellowly, but he was far outside its range now.

He realized he wasn't flapping quite so hard anymore, nor were his arms weary. He pumped the air almost casually, feeling its weight throttle against his palms like molasses. Slowly, he lowered himself, watching the roof reassert itself over his head, until he hovered directly in front of the round, cross-paned window of the attic. There was a book propped open on a steamer chest just inside the dust-grimed window. Clete squinted through his glasses at the tiny columns of type, flapping his arms cautiously so as to keep a steady altitude. The book was his and Rachel's family Bible. He had positioned it there ten minutes earlier, opened at random, directly beneath the attic light. He had intentionally not looked to see where he'd opened it to.

He read to himself, picking a verse from the right page. *But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty...*

He said the words of the verse to himself several times, swishing the air lazily. When he was sure he would remember the phrase, he turned again, looking out over the dimming yard and the barn. After a few moment's contemplation, he decided to attempt a small, experimental swoosh. He leaned forward, gathering momentum, and swooped. The evening air billowed beneath him, supporting him as he swept along a mild current. He spread his arms and glided out over the yard, picking up speed as he slipped from one air flux to the next. The barn loomed before him, swaying ponderously. He approached it. Bars of air beat at his shirtsleeves and batted his pant legs. Clete wondered if he could simply heave up to the barn with a series of flaps, slow himself, and then land

in the open hay loft. He decided to try it. He angled up as the dark shape of the barn heaved over him. With a round of gentle arm waves, he settled smoothly onto the edge of the loft. His weight returned to him grudgingly as his feet touched down, and he could feel the relaxation of that secret, mental muscle.

Clete looked around as if realizing for the first time where he was. Bales of stacked hay lay like sleeping soldiers along the canted roof of the loft. He could smell the familiar barny smell of wood dust, loose straw, and- faintly- animal dung. Below him, he could here Bethel softly pawing the dirt floor and chewing her cud. He was in the hay loft. He had gotten here without ever touching the yard. He hadn't passed the familiar old water pump with its rusty bucket or climbed the old plank ladder. He had, in fact, flown straight in like a kite.

He had flown into the loft.

Clete's frown slowly, haltingly, fell from his haggard old farmer's face. In its place erected a careful, almost childlike smile.

They were half-way through their dinner before Rachel said anything. She carefully dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a cloth napkin and reached for her water glass.

"Decided to take up flying, then, did you?" she asked with remarkable mundanity.

Clete considered the question as he chewed methodically. After a pause he answered.

"Ayuh, I guess I have."

He had gone up to the attic as soon as he got back from the barn. He needed to turn off the light. He also needed to check the old family Bible to see what it had been turned open to. It had been first Corinthians. Verse twenty-seven of chapter one began with "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise..."

There hadn't been much of a chance that Clete had imagined the whole thing anyway. Clete wasn't a man given to very much imagining.



The next morning Clete got up at five-thirty. He had been getting up at five-thirty for most of forty years and he did so without the aid of an alarm clock or the customary rooster. He

dressed in front of his closet mirror, choosing another pair of heavy denim overalls and a different flannel work shirt. He dipped his comb into the water basin on his dresser and raked the stiff bristles of his gray crew-cut until it was as flat as the face of a new stump. He examined himself grimly over the lenses of his glasses, and then went downstairs to meet Rachel for breakfast.

He flew over to the barn to slop the pigs and feed the horses. Getting airborne, he discovered, was something that quickly became easier with practice. When he was done milking Bethel, he made a spontaneous attempt to fly back to the house with the milk pail in his hand. He stood behind the barn, just outside the pig fence, and flapped steadily with his right hand, using the left to hold the pail. The air sang between his sieved fingers, thickening as it had before, but he was hardly able to get one boot off the ground while holding the bucket. He put the pail down on the straw-covered ground and stared at it dourly. What good was flying going to be if he couldn't carry anything?

A fuzzy thought appeared in his mind, offering a solution. Perhaps he could make himself a belt-hook to hang things on, so he wouldn't have to use his arms to carry anything. The picture in his mind limped with the effort. It was like something from a child's crayon drawing. He saw himself flying gamely over the barn, trying to keep steady while a bucket of milk slopped from his belt. The picture disintegrated. Too messy. Too impractical. Why go to the effort to fly the milk over to the back veranda with a hook, spilling most along the way, when he could just as quickly walk it?

No, he concluded, flying wasn't going to be the sort of thing that would revolutionize his farm life. Maybe he'd do it now and then just for the enjoyment of it, like walking down to Strecker woods and back on a summer evening. He'd tell Rachel he was just going to step out for a little fly. No harm in that. Otherwise...

Otherwise Clete would simply go about business as usual. Being able to fly didn't get the fields plowed and seeded. It didn't get the pigs slopped or the cow milked. He was still Cletus Arvil Starcher, flying-man or not, and he still had farming to do.

That decided, Clete picked up the milk pail, turned on his heel, and whistling a strangely melodic near-monotone, headed smartly through the open barn toward the house.

Later that day, while plowing the rest of the Strecker loop, he decided to fly home for lunch.



It wasn't until the next evening that Clete discovered another mental muscle he had spent most of his life not knowing about.

He had used a portion of the evening to fly out to the southeast corner of Bethel's and the horses' pasture. A few braids of barbed wire had come loose of the fence-post out there, probably stripped by a wandering black bear or coyote. Clete discovered that he could carry small objects easily enough while flying, simply by utilizing the multiple pockets of his overalls. He had his hammer hooked into the loop on his hip and a handful of three inch nails in the front pouch. In the past, it would have taken him at least ten minutes to walk to that corner of the pasture, not counting time avoiding the mud bogs and puddles that were so prevalent this time of year. He flew there in less than forty seconds, catching tiny flashes of his reflection against the blue-mirrored sky of the pasture's puddles.

Later, while leaning against the pig fence watching the sows wrestle for space at the trough, the second idea came to him. It wasn't like the idea to fly that had occurred to him in the field two days earlier. Not entirely. This was an idea about something he could make. It was a refinement of the belt-hook idea for carrying things while flying, but it was much clearer, and it would work much better. He marveled that it had not been obvious to him from the first. That initial child's crayon-drawing of himself flying with the milk pail spilling and jostling from his belt was gone. It was replaced with a perfect mental blueprint of a device; a device he knew he could make. It could carry things of all different sizes and shapes, and it had a counterbalancing mechanism, so that it would stay level no matter what position he flew in. His mind chewed systematically at the invention, tackling problems and proposing revisions. And some, detached part of him just sat and watched, amazed that he was actually having such inventive, imaginative thoughts.

He was snapped out of this diversion by the commotion of the pigs. They lolled over each other with their sausage-like, coarse-haired bodies, grunting and squealing indignantly at the trough. The feed was getting low.

Clete stepped toward the barn to retrieve a bag of sow-feed and then stopped, his face a mask of mild surprise. There weren't any more bags stacked in the inside corner of the barn, under the loft ladder. He'd need to walk over to the feed shed with the wheelbarrow and bring back

another load.

As he turned and walked out of the shadow of the barn to pick up the wheelbarrow, yet another idea struck Clete. This one was *exactly* like the idea he'd had while riding the Farm-all in the east field. He recognized the quality of it. It was like a post-hypnotic suggestion, or like meeting somebody you had only ever dreamed about. It came in the form of a question to himself.

Why am I walking all the way over to the feed shed to carry back sow feed?

Because the sows are hungry, he thought dimly. A hungry sow is an unhappy sow. An unhappy sow isn't a very tasty sow. But that wasn't the real thrust of the question. He knew that, because he'd asked it of himself. It wasn't why are you *getting* feed for the sows? It was why are you *walking* to get feed for the sows?

Maybe there was a different way of doing it; a way he could get the sows their feed without all the heavy work and strain on his already sore back. And it would probably be faster, too. Faster is more practical, if quality isn't spent, or so his mother always used to tell him.

The idea nagged at Clete. He adjusted his John Deere cap and rubbed thoughtfully at his upper lip. No harm in trying, he thought for the second time in three days.

He looked at the narrow face of the feed shed some thirty yards distant. It stared back at him blindly, full of dumb curiosity. *You lookin' over dis way?* a voice in Clete's head queried. It was the voice of the hired hand his parents had had when he was a small boy. A black man with graying hair. His name had been Chesapeake Chester, or at least that was what everyone called him. *Is it that ol' feed shed you starin' at, boy? If you want some feed to give those sows over yonder, you gonna hafta walk over an grab you up a sack. 'Less you know some other way t'do it...*

Clete could envision the inside of the shed. It was stuffy and full of the rich smells of animal feed and fertilizer. Rachel's rake and shovel and garden trowel hung on the right-hand wall, splashed with a dusty sun-beam from a missing plank along the back. To the left was a rack of two-by-four shelves, three high and three long. The shelves were stacked high with this season's store of feed and Garden-Grow. He could see the big, fifty pound burlap sacks with the picture of the smiling pig on the front. Hubbard Hog Feed, the legend over the smiling pig read.

Clete stared at the double doors of the feed shed and frowned that thoughtful, old man's frown under his glasses. He absently rubbed his upper lip, running the calluses of his thumb and fore-finger over the sand-papery gray stubble.

The doors opened.

There was no fanfare. No explosive motion or puff of magician's smoke. The doors simply swung apart and gently backed against the outside of the shed as if someone had casually pulled them open to get some feed. Clete wasn't surprised. He could feel the mental muscle flexing

rhythmically in his head. It wasn't even as hard as flying.

Steadily, like the parade of Mickey Mouse's brooms in Fantasia (which Clete had seen some twenty years earlier with Anne and little Dennis), fifty pound burlap sacks of Hubbard Hog Feed began to emerge from the darkness inside the feed shed. They marched across the yard to the barn, each bag bouncing slightly as it moved, as if being hefted along a chain of invisible hired hands.

Clete was glad Rachel couldn't see the feed shed from the kitchen window of the house. She had grouched enough about his flying. He couldn't bear to think what she'd say about this.

He walked to the corner of the barn, where the feed bags rounded the entrance and floated inside. He reached out and touched one as it went by. The dry burlap rasped under his palm and swept on. Twenty bags went by, making disembodied pill-shaped shadows on the grass. When the last one turned the corner into the barn Clete followed it. He came into the shadow of the barn entrance just in time to see it settle gently onto the other nineteen, which had formed a neat, bricklayer's stack under the loft ladder. It was just the way he stacked them when he did it by hand.

Clete considered the stack, his lips pressed together in contemplation. Now here was a skill he could put to work.

He came out of the barn a few moments later with one of the sacks hefted easily over his right shoulder. He plopped it down onto the pig-fence and pulled the string seal with a practiced hand. Yellow feed poured from the mouth of the sack into the feed trough with a dusty hiss, sending the sows into an ecstasy of grunts and smacks.

Clete glanced over at the feed shed thirty yards away and deftly closed the doors.

Greetings, reader. This has been a teaser excerpt of "Flyover Country", which is available in hardcover and PDF download from www.lulu.com. If you enjoyed "James Potter and the Hall of Elders' Crossing", I suspect you'll also enjoy this quirky little tale. It's short and sweet, but I think it's fun and (dare I admit) a little endearing. Plus, it's a great way to support your friendly neighborhood independent author since he (quite understandably) does not make any income from writing James Potter stories.

Thank you for checking out the story, and happy reading.

G. Norman Lippert