



## 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 what-not. 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 try-outs.

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 over-reacting. 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 butter beers 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's 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 hand-made 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 31<sup>st</sup>, 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 curse, rendering them incapable of responding to interrogation, all three were sent under guard to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies. A search of the ransacked departments, which included the Department of Magical Cooperation, the Currency Conversion Office, and the Hall of Mysteries, however, revealed no apparently missing objects or moneys. The criminals' 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. Fikkli 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 mis-labeled 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 Ravensclaws 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 Ravensclaws. The Gremlins bowed deeply, grinning, obviously pleased with themselves, and then joined their team-mates 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 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 business-like 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 that Harry knew 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.”

“Madame 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, Madame?” 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 butter beers 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?”

“Woo hoo!” 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. Getting 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 acclimated 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 talking 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, Herminiminnie...” 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 tree-tops, 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?”