



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 here 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's 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 on his head 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 found him, clambering toward another landing, one floor below.

James's 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’s office. The room was still dim with very early morning shadows. The portraits of all the previous headmasters 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 you, Ms. Curry. Wasn’t what you 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.

“Madame 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, off-hand 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.”

“Madame 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, Madame 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 unplotable. 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 House mates 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 into 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 log-in 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 Astra-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’s 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 dragon’s 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 under-age 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 fire-whiskey 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 tip 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?"