



21. THE GIFT OF THE GREEN BOX

The last weeks of the school year spun out before James like a blur, remarkably free of deathly peril and adventure, but packed nonetheless with the lesser stresses of schoolwork and final essays and wand practicals, all of which were relatively welcome in the wake of the Hall of Elders' Crossing. To no one's great surprise, Hufflepuff was awarded the House Cup, being the only House to avoid major point deductions for involvement in the various Merlin conspiracy skullduggeries. The broomstick caper alone had cost Ravenclaw and Gryffindor fifty points each.

On the morning of the last day of school, James was stuffing his books and extra school robes into his trunk when Noah pounded up the stairs calling for him.

"Ron Weasley's in the fireplace. He wants to talk to you."

James grinned. "Excellent! Tell him I'll be right there!"

“James, look at you!” Uncle Ron cried when James tromped down the stairs a minute later, still tying his tie. “All respectable and everything. Have a good year, did you?”

James nodded. “I guess I did. Looks like I’ll pass, after all. Spent all of Monday night getting ready for Franklyn’s D.A.D.A. practical, then had the most horrible sensation that I’d forgotten everything five minutes before the test.”

“I wasn’t exactly talking about your school work, you dunce,” said the face in the embers, grinning crookedly. “Your dad told me all about the Merlin conspiracy you uncovered. That’s brilliant stuff, and no mistake.”

“Yeah, well...” James said sheepishly. “It was all pretty exciting there for a while, but it’s weird. Five weeks of schoolwork and suddenly all of that seems like it happened to someone else.”

That’s the way of it,” Ron nodded. “The dull parts of life spread out in your memory and crowd out the exciting parts until they just seem like little flashes. It’s the way your brain copes with it all, I guess. Speaking of which, how’s Professor Jackson doing?”

James rolled his eyes. “Nothing can keep old Stonewall down for long. He wasn’t really injured in his duel with Delacroix, even though his back-up wand wasn’t as powerful as the one she broke. Apparently, he chased her through the woods for hours and finally cornered her in a clearing. He says he’d have gotten her, except that she cheated, calling on the enemy naiads and dryads to fight with her. The trees attacked him from behind, knocking him out. That’s how he got the big bruise on his forehead. Still, he was back in class the day after Prescott left, and he’s been raining fire on Zane and me ever since.”

Ron raised an eyebrow. “Can’t really blame him, I guess.”

“We gave him back his briefcase and apologized and everything. I mean, I know we ruined his lifelong quest to protect the relic robe and prevent the return of the most dangerous wizard of all time and all, but come on. Merlin turned out to be all right. Delacroix got sent back to the States to stand trial in the American wizarding courts. Everything worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

“All I can say is if *I* was him, I’d wish you spiders in your drawers for the rest of your life,” Ron mused. “But that’s just me. My mind tends to go that way.”

“Honestly, Uncle Ron. I want to make it right. I *liked* Professor Jackson at first.”

“At the risk of sounding like a responsible adult, James, actions have consequences. Apologizing is great, but ‘sorry’ isn’t a magic word. You not only ruined Jackson’s plans, you took a stab at his pride. You succeeded in foiling him. In his mind, you made a fool out of him. That’s a hard thing for a bloke like him to get over. Frankly, you can’t blame him, can you?”

“I guess not,” James agreed sulkily. “At least he didn’t fail us in Technomancy. It was a close thing, though.”

“Good man. Still, don’t get too wrapped up in classwork, you. You’ve got a reputation to live up to.”

“Or down to,” Noah’s voice quipped from nearby.

“I heard that, Metzker,” Ron said sternly. “It’s a proud Potter tradition, squeaking by in school. Started with James Potter the first. Besides, you’re one to talk, Mr. Gremlin.”

“Got high marks this year, all across the board,” Noah said primly.

Ron grinned again. “Thanks to your friend Petra, no doubt. She’s to you Gremlins what Hermione was for Harry and me. Hold on. She wants to say hello, James.”

The face in the coals sank out of sight. A moment later, Hermione’s pleasant smile and perpetually bushy hair formed. “James, you look very handsome,” she said proudly. “Don’t you listen to your uncle. He studied plenty and was just as worried about marks as anyone.”

“That’s not true!” a muffled voice called from the depths of the fireplace. Hermione grimaced.

“Well, *almost* anyone,” she conceded. “Anyway, your mum and dad will be very proud of you, and so are your uncle and me. Oh, I just can’t believe how fast the time goes. It seems like only yesterday that we were all still there,” she sighed, looking around the common room. “It looks almost exactly the same. We’ll have to make a point of visiting next year. It’ll be nice to see the old place again.” Even in the embers, Aunt Hermione’s eyes glistened a little. She blinked, and then returned her gaze to James. “Anyway, James. Ron’s been talking to your father, you know, and the two of them wanted to ask you something. I thought it’d be best if someone besides either of them brought it up, though, because, frankly, they’re both so silly about it that they’d influence your response.”

“What is it?” James asked, squatting down in front of the fireplace.

“Don’t kneel,” Hermione chided automatically. “You’ll scuff up your pants with ash. It’s about the Headmistress. She’s planning to retire, you know.”

James didn’t know. “She is? But... what would she do with herself?”

Hermione gave James a look that said she’d just remembered how old he was. “Minerva McGonagall has quite a life outside the walls of Hogwarts, James, as difficult as that may be for you believe. She’s even, I understand, taken Mr. Finney up on his offer of dinner in London.”

“She did?” James hooted.

“She did?” Noah chimed almost simultaneously from the couch, looking up from a book.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It was a purely professional meeting, I can assure you both. She performed a few minor memory modifications upon Mr. Finney, not really causing him to forget his visit

here, but altering it. It's all a part of Mr. Dolohov's programme to 'clean' - as he calls it - the school's security record. Still," Hermione added, lowering her voice a bit, "she did speak rather highly of Mr. Finney. It would be quite nice to think that she might find a, er, *companion* for herself. After all..."

"Hermione!" Ron's voice barked from the depths of the fireplace again.

"Anyway," Hermione said, turning businesslike. "Yes, the Headmistress does plan to retire, possibly as soon as this summer, assuming a suitable replacement could be found. Most likely, she will stay on to teach Transfiguration and help the new headmaster, whoever he or she might be. Some had suggested Neville Longbottom, but the Ministry feels he might be a bit young for the post, which is just silly, but politics being what they are..."

"Merlin!" James exclaimed. "You're all thinking of asking him to be the new headmaster!"

A whoop of happy triumph emanated from the depths of the fireplace. Hermione scowled.

"You can leave *me* out of this, thank you very much. This is all your father's and uncle's idea. But I can see you are as mad about it as they are."

"But how can he be the headmaster?" Noah asked, jumping off the couch and crouching in front of the fireplace. "Sorry," he added quickly. "Couldn't help overhearing and all that."

"Really?" Hermione replied a bit archly. "Here, I had assumed you were suitably entrenched in that Arithmancy textbook. How silly of me. Please do keep it a secret though, the both of you. Oh, what am I saying? Ron, you might as well explain this." She sighed and blew her bangs out of her face in a gesture James remembered from his earliest memories of aunt Hermione. She gave a bemused smile. "James, have a good trip. We'll see you in a week. Rose and Hugo say hello and to buy them some Cauldron Cakes on the train. Good day, Noah."

She disappeared from the embers and uncle Ron's face appeared again. "Excellent idea, eh?" he announced, looking from Noah to James enthusiastically.

"But how?" Noah asked again. "I mean, the bloke was the most potentially dangerous wizard in the history of the planet a few weeks ago, wasn't he? And now you think the Ministry will put him in charge of a bunch of kids?"

"Not without lots of oversight," Ron said quickly. He had obviously thought a lot about it. "That's where McGonagall and Neville come in. They'll watch him and help out, sort of like a board of directors. McGonagall has already agreed to it, although we had to push her a bit on it. She's afraid she'll still basically be doing all the work, but with Merlin getting the credit. Might happen, too, I guess, but your dad and I don't think so. Merlin seems the sort of guy born to lead, you know?"

“Yeah,” James agreed. “But still, he comes from a time when leading meant telling people which guillotine had the shortest queue. I can’t imagine that the Ministry will agree to put him in charge of Hogwarts.”

“Your Merlin’s a surprisingly quick study, James,” Ron said seriously. “He’s already been all over the Ministry, meeting people and having big long discussions about the way things work in this day and age. He’s warming up to it, I have to say!”

“So why wouldn’t they put him somewhere there, then?” Noah asked. “I mean, most famous wizard in the world and all. Seems like he’d be in line for Minister of Magic, if nothing else.”

Ron grinned a bit maliciously. “I suppose you are both too young to understand the implications of the phrase ‘overqualified and underexperienced’. Basically, no department wants him. A guy like Merlin doesn’t work well behind a desk, for one thing. And it’s hard to imagine that any department head who hired him would stay the department head for very long afterwards.”

“You mean he’d take over, right?” James confirmed.

“Take over, at the very least. He’s a bit of a loose cannon. Sure, he’s probably the most powerful single wizard alive today, but with a thousand-year gap in his work experience. As fast as he picks things up, he’s sure to be a poor fit in the red-tape world of the Ministry. Your *dad* can hardly stand it, James. Think about what it’ll be like for a bloke who’s used to being able to banish his enemies to the Netherworld with a glance. The fact of the matter is that the Ministry is looking for an out-of-the-way place to stick the old man. Someplace prominent enough to fit a wizard of his stature, but far enough away not to threaten anyone, metaphorically speaking. Or maybe even *not* metaphorically speaking. One never knows.”

“And Hogwarts just happens to be in need of a new headmaster,” Noah said, grinning.

“Well?” Ron said, meeting Noah’s grin. “It does seem a little too perfect, doesn’t it?”

“Even if the Ministry does agree to it, you think he’ll do it?” James asked.

In the fireplace, Ron seemed to shrug. “Who can tell? Nobody has asked him yet. But first thing’s first.” Ron grew serious and studied James. “You know him best, Nephew. You were there when he came out of the past. You were the one who talked him into coming and helping Hogwarts and the wizarding world. What do you think? Do you think he’d be a good headmaster? Do *you* think we should ask him?”

Noah leaned back against the base of the couch, looking at James, waiting for his response. James knew he should think about it, but he already knew his answer. Merlin was a complicated man, and he wasn’t exactly what anyone could call ‘good’, not in the sense that Albus Dumbledore or even Minerva McGonagall were good. But James knew one thing for sure: Merlin *wanted* to be good. It was hard to tell if it was better to have a headmaster who was good by nature, or one that was good because he had to try to be so every day, but James was old enough to know that it was a risk worth taking. *Besides*, the gremlin part of

James whispered, *it might be fun having a headmaster who'd banish someone like Tabitha Corsica to the Netherworld with a glance.*

"Ask him," James said, nodding once, emphatically. "If the Ministry goes for it, ask him. And I hope he accepts."

"Woo hoo!" Noah hooted, throwing his hands in the air.

"Keep it to yourselves, for now," Ron said sternly. "If word gets out before your dad and Hermione arrange things at the Ministry, it could spoil everything. Got it?"

Noah nodded. James smiled agreement.

"Your dad took back the cloak and the map, did he?" Ron asked James, changing the subject.

"Yeah. And I'm apparently going to be grounded when I get back. Two weeks off my broom."

Ron clucked his tongue. "Just when you were getting pretty good on it, I hear. Ah well. You know your dad has to keep up the look of the thing, punishing you and all, but he's proud of you. Take it from me."

James' smile widened and his cheeks flushed.

"Not that I'd try it again, mind you," Ron said, his grin vanishing. "Once is a charm. If you pull something like that again, Ginny will probably decide to home school you in the basement. Take it from me, she's no one to fiddle with, James."



Later that afternoon, James met Zane and Ralph outside as the Alma Alerons gathered to disembark. As they watched, the three flying vehicles were driven out of the Garage, and then the Garage was broken down and packed inside the trunk of the Dodge Hornet.

“There’s something deep and mystical about that, but I can’t quite put my finger on it,” Zane said thoughtfully.

“What? The Garage being packed into what it was housing a few minutes ago?”

“No. The way Professor Franklyn seems to get more and more popular with the girls the closer it gets to his departure.” It was true. Franklyn was quite popular with the ladies, from the oldest staff matron to the first year girls, who giggled when he passed them, touching each lightly on the head. The only women he seemed to have no effect on were the headmistress and Victoire, who claimed to believe he was a pompous old blowhard. Ted had explained that one of the benefits of being old was being free to flirt with any girl you wanted, because none of them took you serious enough to get offended. Zane found this remarkably instructive.

“When I get old, I’m going to flirt like that,” he said wistfully.

“He’s not even flirting,” James said, narrowing his eyes. “He’s just smiling at them and acting all self-effacing, like he always does.”

“That just shows what *you* know about flirting.”

Ralph rolled his eyes. “I’m surprised you aren’t taking notes.”

“He should offer a class,” Zane said seriously, watching Franklyn bow and kiss Petra Morganstern’s hand goodbye. Petra grinned and glanced aside, her cheeks reddening a little. When Franklyn straightened, she leaned in and gave him a chaste little peck on the cheek.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of Hogwarts,” he said, turning to address the crowd. “It has been our distinct pleasure to serve you this year. It has been, as I knew it would be, a remarkably instructive year for us. We have strengthened our resolve to work with the European magical community to maintain fairness and equity worldwide, not only for the magical world, but for all humanity.” He scanned the crowd, beaming, and then took off his glasses and sighed. “We are, I suspect, at the beginning of challenging times. The winds of change are blowing. On both sides of the ocean, we face forces that would shake our culture to its foundations. But we have made friends, you and us, and united we will stand, regardless of what may come. I have been around for a very long time, and I can say with some degree of confidence that change is *always* in the wind. The challenge of good men is not to thwart change, but to mold it as it comes, so that it may benefit rather than destroy. After this year, I am indeed confident that we may succeed in that endeavor.”

There was a round of applause, although it felt to James a little perfunctory. Not everyone in the crowd agreed with Franklyn, and not all for the same reasons. Still, it had been a good speech, and James was glad Franklyn had made it. While the crowd was still cheering, Franklyn climbed into the Volkswagen Beetle. He waved once from the open door.

Someone tapped James on the shoulder. He turned, and then had to look up. Professor Jackson was standing behind him. Tall and dressed in black, Jackson looked more imposing than ever. He looked down his nose at James, his bushy brows low.

“I thought you might wish to have this,” Jackson said. James noticed that the man was holding a small wooden box. Jackson looked at it in his hands, and then handed it to James. “It was found in Madame Delacroix’s quarters. I believe it belongs to you more than it does to anyone. Dispose of it as you see fit.”

James held the box, which was surprisingly light. It was a strange greenish color, covered in deep, carved scrollwork. It reminded him of the vines on the door of the Grotto Keep. He looked up to ask Professor Jackson what it was, but the man was already striding across the courtyard toward the Stutz Dragonfly. He stopped when he reached the vehicle, and then turned, raising one hand to the assembly, his face as stony as his nickname. The crowd cheered, a much longer and more sustained ovation than even Franklyn had received. Surprisingly, Jackson had become a favorite at Hogwarts, not so much in spite of his curmudgeon-like demeanor as because of it.

Once Jackson had climbed into the vehicle, the rest of the assembly boarded quickly. The grey-cloaked delegates from the American Department of Magical Administration had arrived from London the day before to join their fellows for the trip back to the States. They filed into the vehicles, nodding goodbyes to the assembly. Last were the porters, who packed the enormous pile of luggage into the apparently bottomless trunks of the vehicles, and then climbed into the front seats to drive.

The wings unfolded from the vehicles smoothly, delicately, and began to thrash the air. The Dodge Hornet took off first. With a squeak of springs and creak of metal it rose into the air, turning slowly. The Stutz Dragonfly and the Volkswagen Beetle followed, the low drone of their wings beating the air and rippling the grass of the courtyard. Then, with sudden grace and speed, they raced off, rising, their noses tilted toward the ground. In less than a minute, the noise of their departure was lost in the late spring wind that blew over the hills.

Ralph, Zane and James plopped onto a bench near the courtyard entrance.

“So what’s in the box Jackson gave you?” Ralph asked, peering curiously at it.

“I wouldn’t even open it, if I was you,” Zane warned. “Remember what he said about making our lives ‘interesting’? He’s the kind of guy to wait right until the moment he leaves to get his revenge on you. That way, he’s gone when the trouble starts.” He tapped the side of his head wisely.

James frowned and shook his head slowly. He looked at the box on his lap. It had a brass latch on the front, holding the lid shut. Without a word, he flipped the catch and raised the lid. Zane and Ralph leaned in, craning to see. The inside of the box was lined with purple velvet. There was one object inside, lying atop a piece of folded parchment.

“I don’t get it,” Ralph said, sitting back again. “It’s a doll.”

James removed it and held it up. It was indeed a small figure, roughly made of burlap and twine, with mismatched buttons for eyes.

Zane peered at it, his face serious. "It's... it's you, James."

Sure enough, the figure did bear a striking resemblance. Black yarn on the head formed a good representation of James' unruly hair. Even the shape of the head, the line of the stitched mouth, and the placement of the button eyes made an eerie portrait.

James shuddered. "It's a voodoo doll," he said. He remembered the note inside the box. All three boys leaned in to read it as he unfolded it.

Mr. Potter,

You will surely recognize what this object is. There was no time in this year's Technomancy curriculum to discuss the ancient art of Representational Harmonics, but I suspect you grasp the implications. This was found inside Madame Delacroix's quarters. After some discussion with the headmistress and the portraits of your Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore - whom you should know have taken rather an interest in you - it was determined that you might benefit from knowing how Madame Delacroix used this object against you. The elegance of her manipulation was quite impressive, really. This figure was placed next to a much larger figure of your father, Harry Potter. On the other side of that was a candle. It seems apparent that she kept that candle lit at all times. The result, of course, Mr. Potter, was that your figure was always in the shadow of the representation of your father.

There is always a grain of truth in the manipulations of the voodoo art. Delacroix knew that you would legitimately struggle with the expectations of your legendary father. The lesson you must learn from this, Mr. Potter, is that emotions are not bad, but they must be examined. Know yourself. Feelings always seem valid, but they can confuse. And they can, as you have seen, be used against you. I repeat, as your teacher and as your elder, know your feelings. Master them or they will master you.

Theodore Hirshall Jackson

"Wow!" Ralph breathed. "We didn't call her the voodoo queen for nothing!"

Zane asked, "What are you going to do with it, James? I mean, if you destroy it, will you be destroyed, somehow?"

James stared at the small, unattractive caricature of himself. “I don’t think so,” he replied thoughtfully. “I don’t think Jackson would’ve given it to me in that case. I think he just means for me to remember what happened. And to try to make sure it never happens again.”

“So?” Zane repeated. “What are you going to do with it?”

James stood, stuffing the doll into the pocket of his jeans. “I don’t know. I think I’ll keep it. For a while, at least.”

With that, the three boys meandered into the school, intent on doing as little as possible with their last day of the school year.

Late that night, unable to sleep from the excitement of the next day’s departure, James got out of bed. He crept down the stairs into the common room, hoping someone else might still be up for a game of wizard chess or even winks and augers. By the glow of the banked fire, the room appeared to be empty. As he was turning away, something caught James’ eye and he looked again. The ghost of Cedric Diggory sat near the fire. His silvery form was still transparent, but was noticeably more solid than the last time James had seen him.

“I was trying to think of a name for myself,” Cedric said, smiling as James threw himself onto the couch nearby.

“You’ve got a name already, haven’t you?” James answered.

“Well, not a proper ghostly name. Not like ‘Nearly Headless Nick’ or ‘the Bloody Baron’. I need something with some panache.”

James considered it. “How about ‘the Chaser of Annoying Muggles?’”

“It’s a little long.”

“Well, can you do any better?”

“I was thinking- you’d better not laugh,” the ghost said, giving James a stern look. “I was thinking of something like ‘the Spectre of Silence’.”

“Hmm,” James replied carefully. “But you aren’t silent. In fact, you sound a lot better now. Your voice doesn’t sound like its being blown in from the Great Beyond anymore.”

“Yeah,” Cedric agreed. “I’ve become quite a bit more... here, sort of. I’m as ghostly as the rest of the school ghosts, now. I was silent for a long time, though, wasn’t I?”

“I guess so. But still, with a name like ‘the Spectre of Silence’,” James said doubtfully. “It’s going to be hard to make that stick if you go around chatting people up all the time.”

"Maybe I could be all broody and quiet a lot of the time," Cedric mused. "Just do a lot of floating around and looking dour and everything. And then, when I pass by, people would whisper to each other, 'hey, there he goes! The Spectre of Silence!'"

James shrugged. "It's worth a shot. I guess you have the summer to practice the whole brooding silence bit."

"I guess so."

James suddenly sat up. "So, do you think you'll be the new Gryffindor ghost?" he asked. "I mean, with Nearly Headless Nick gone on to wherever ghosts go, we don't have a House ghost anymore."

Cedric thought for a moment. "I don't think so, really. Sorry. I was a Hufflepuff, remember?"

James slumped back. "Yeah. I forgot."

A few minutes went by, and then Cedric spoke again. "That was a pretty great thing you did, going out and calling Merlin back to help us out when it seemed like he'd left for good."

James lifted his head and looked at the ghost. He frowned a little. "That? Well, it was just a shot in the dark, really. It was all my fault Merlin was brought to this time at all. I thought I was doing the world this big favor, standing in the way of Delacroix's and Jackson's evil plan. Turns out she was using me all along and Jackson was actually a good guy."

"Well?" Cedric countered. "You learned something, then, didn't you?"

"I don't know," James said automatically. He thought for a moment and then added, "Yeah, I guess I did."

"There is one way that you and your dad are one and the same, James," Cedric said.

James laughed a little humorlessly. "I can't see what it is. All I learned is that my way of doing things isn't Dad's. If I try to do it his way, I screw everything up. If I try to do it my way, I might help things scrape by on sheer luck. Dad's way was the way of the hero. My way is the way of the manager. My best talent is asking for help."

"No, James," Cedric said, leaning forward to look James directly in the eye. "Your best talent is inspiring people to *want* to help. You think that's no big deal? The world needs people like you, because most of the people out there don't have the courage or the passion or the direction to be heroes. They *want* to be, but they need someone to tell them *why*, and to show them *how*. You have that gift, James. Your dad was a hero because he was the Boy Who Lived. He had a destiny. It wasn't an easy road for him, but it was an *obvious* road. There was Harry and there was Voldemort. He knew where he stood and what he had to do, even if it killed him. You, though... you are a hero because you choose to be one, everyday. And you have the talent to encourage others to choose that, too."

James stared into the banked coals of the fire. “I’m no hero.”

Cedric smiled and sat back again. “You only think that because you think heroes always win. Trust me on this one, James. A hero isn’t defined by winning. Loads of heroes die in the effort. Most of them never get any recognition. No, a hero is just somebody who does the right thing when it would be far, far easier to do nothing.”

James turned to look at the ghost, smiling crookedly. “Maybe we should call you ‘the Spectre of Cheesiness.’”

“Ha, ha,” the ghost replied.

James stood up again. “Thanks, Cedric. That... helps.”

Cedric nodded. James headed back for the stairs, but stopped with his foot on the bottom step. “One thing still bothers me, though, Cedric. Maybe you know something about it, being a ghost and all.”

“Maybe. Ask me.”

“The dryad in the forest said that there was an heir of Voldemort. She said that this person was alive and nearby, right here on the school grounds.”

Cedric nodded slowly. “I was there when you told Snape about it.”

“Well, whoever that is, I think that’s who took Ralph’s GameDeck and used the name Austramaddux. If that hadn’t happened, none of this would’ve come about. Whoever it is had to have been working with Miss Sacarhina from the very beginning.”

Cedric looked away, out a nearby window. “You think you know who it is?”

“Tabitha Corsica,” James said flatly. “I thought it might be her after I talked to Snape and I *still* think it could be her. So her broom wasn’t the Merlin staff. There’s still something scary about it. *And* about her in general.”

Cedric stood and walked through the chair, apparently without noticing he was doing so. “I’ve felt something, James. I’ll admit that to you. There is a sense of He Who Must Not Be Named here still. It lingers within the halls. It’s like a smell, like something rancid and oozing and... purple, somehow. Maybe I am more sensitive to it than the other ghosts. After all, he was responsible for my death.”

“Yeah,” James said quietly. “I hadn’t forgotten.”

“But James, things are rarely as obvious as we’d like to think they are. In the real world, at least in our time, if not in Merlin’s, evil wears many masks. It’s confusing. You have to be very careful. Sometimes, even good people can look bad. A lot of us, your father included, made that mistake when it came to Professor Snape.”

“So did I,” James admitted. “With Professor Jackson.”

Cedric nodded.

“But I would’ve sworn that Tabitha was involved in the whole Merlin conspiracy. What do you think the real story is with her and her broom?”

Cedric looked at James for a long moment, studying him. “Did it ever occur to you that her broom might be exactly what she says it is?”

“What?” James scoffed, “A ‘Muggle artifact’? That’s just a ruse she came up with, isn’t it?”

Cedric shrugged, but it looked more like the shrug of someone who knows more than he intends to tell. “The scariest people in the world are not always the ones who are bent on evil, James. Sometimes, the scariest person is the one who mistakes their own lies for the truth.”

James blinked. “You mean... Tabitha Corsica *believes* all that stuff she said in the debate? About Voldemort actually being a good guy? That he was squashed by the Ministry and the magical ruling class because they couldn’t have him changing the status quo? She can’t *really* believe that, can she?”

Cedric looked back at James, and then sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know. But I do know that lots of people *do* believe it. And she seems pretty sincere about it. That broom of hers may have some scary mojo built into it, but it’s nothing compared to the dark magic someone might conjure if their heart is crooked enough to twist a lie into something they believe is truth.”

As James climbed quietly back into his bed, his mind raced. He had never even considered that Tabitha Corsica might believe the things she said. He had assumed that she was supporting the Progressive Element propaganda because she fully accepted and endorsed their ultimate, dark goals. For a moment, he felt vaguely sorry for her. It was awful to think that someone like her might believe she was morally in the right, and that he, James Potter, and his father, were the evil ones. It was almost unthinkable, but not entirely. Outside, the moon was full and bright. James fell asleep with its beams on his face, pale and cool, his brow still slightly furrowed.

The next day, James, Zane and Ralph rode the Hogwarts Express back to Platform Nine and Three Quarters. Zane’s parents were there, along with his younger sister, Greer, who watched the gigantic crimson engine with naked awe. Standing near them, James spied his mum and dad, herding Albus and Lily along with them. He grinned and waved. It felt like hardly a week ago that he’d watched them from the train as it had pulled out of the station, carrying him to the uncertainty of his first year at Hogwarts. Now he was home again. Hogwarts was wonderful, he thought to himself, but he was glad to be back, after all. Next year, he’d be accompanying Albus on the train, taking him to *his* first year. He’d tease Albus endlessly about what House he’d end up in. It was going to be his summer’s project, in fact. But he wasn’t worried about it. Even if Albus wasn’t a Gryffindor, he’d be okay. James knew that if Albus was indeed sent to another House, part of him, James, would even be a little jealous of him. But only just a little.

As he joined the throng exiting the train, James fell in behind Ted. Ted, James noticed, was holding Victoire's hand.

"You're going to cause a load of trouble, you know," James said, grinning.

"It's a tough job, being this controversial," Ted said humbly, "but we all have our burdens to bear."

"My parents must not see us togezzzer," Victoire commanded. "Ted Lupin, don't you ruin everything. You know zey won't approve. You will keep your mouth shut, too, James."

"Her accent is much more prominent when she's harping, isn't it?" Ted asked James.

James grinned. It was true.

James stopped inside the open door of the train, looking about the platform. Through the crowd of returning students, bustling porters and yelling family members, he saw Zane engulfed in the mutual hug of his pretty blonde mother and his tall, proud father. His sister was sucked into the embrace, as if against her will, happy to see her brother again but still enthralled by the crimson train. Ralph met his dad on the platform with a more restrained hug, both grinning a bit sheepishly. Ralph glanced back up at James and waved.

"Dad says we'll be spending the summer in London! I'll be able to come and visit!"

"Excellent!" James yelled back happily.

And then, as he climbed down, James saw his own family watching for him. In the moment before they caught sight of him, James savored his own happiness. This was indeed home. He ran toward them, patting his jeans pocket to make sure the little doll Madame Delacroix had made of him was still there. It probably wouldn't mean anything, but there was no harm in it. No harm at all.

"James!" Albus cried, seeing him first. "Did you bring us anything? You promised!"

"What am I? Father Christmas?" James answered, laughing as Albus and Lily nearly bowled him over.

"You promised! You promised us Licorice Wands from the cart lady!"

"And Cauldron Cakes for Rose and Hugo." Harry added, grinning.

"Wow, word sure travels fast. All right, all right, I've got stuff for everybody!" James admitted. He emptied his pockets, filling Albus' and Lily's hands with sweets. He pulled the voodoo doll out last and looked at it a bit uncertainly.

"What in the world is that, James?" Ginny said, embracing him and then looking at the object in her son's hands. "It looks like... well, you!"

James' face broke into a grin. "It's for you, Mum. I thought you'd like to keep it when I went off to school next year. You know, to remember me by."

Ginny looked at it quizzically, and then glanced up at Harry. He shrugged and smiled. "Well, it's a bit odd, but all right," she said, taking the doll from him. "If I hug it will you feel it?"

James shrugged, effecting disinterest as the family began to make their way into the main terminal. "I don't know. Whatever. It's... you know, worth a try, I suppose."

Ginny nodded, smiling and throwing a glance at Harry. She gave it a try.

THE END