



## *18.* THE TOWER ASSEMBLY

Dawn was a faint pink line on the rim of the horizon when James opened his eyes. He was lying uncomfortably on the grass at the bottom of the Grotto Keep, and he was cold to the bone. Moaning, he rolled to a sitting position and took stock of his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was that the Merlin throne was gone. There wasn't as much as a depression in the grass where it had stood. The second thing James noticed as he raised his head and looked around was that the Grotto Keep was no longer a magical place. In the absence of the Merlin throne, the island was quickly returning to its wild, random nature. The sense of haunting, gothic architecture was slipping away. Birds sang in the thatch of tree branches overhead.

"Oh-hh," a voice nearby groaned. "Where am I? Somehow, I have the terrible feeling that a cup of coffee and a fireplace is not about to appear before my eyes."

“Zane,” James said, getting shakily to his feet. “Are you all right? Where’s Ralph?”

“I’m here,” Ralph muttered. “I’m just taking inventory of all my bones and major bodily functions. So far, nothing alarming, except that I need a bathroom even more than St. Lokimagus.”

James climbed the steps into the gloom of the upper terraces of the grotto. The early morning light was faint and grey, barely making it through the brush and trees of the island. Zane and Ralph were climbing unsteadily to their feet.

“Merlin’s gone,” James said, looking around. “And I don’t see Jackson or Delacroix, either.” He stepped over the broken bits of Jackson’s wand and shuddered.

“Guess we were wrong about him, weren’t we?” Ralph said.

“We were wrong about loads of stuff,” James agreed softly.

Zane rubbed his lower back and groaned. “Hey, we didn’t do too bad, considering everything. We almost stopped Merlin’s return, thanks to a handy length of log and my catlike reflexes.” His voice sounded hollow in the flat echo of the grotto, and he fell silent. The three boys found the opening that led out to the dragon’s head bridge, hacked through some weeds that had grown up to choke the space, and stumbled out into the dawn. The bridge had partially collapsed, and bore almost no resemblance to the frightening dragon’s head anymore. The bank bordering the forest was muddy and wet, covered in morning dew.

“Hey, look,” Ralph said, pointing. There were tracks in the fresh, slippery mud.

“Looks like two people went that way. Away from the school,” Zane said, bending over to study the sloppy markings. “You think one of them was Merlin?”

James shook his head. “No. Merlin wasn’t wearing shoes. That looks like Delacroix and Jackson to me. She probably left first, and then he set out after her when he came to. Besides, something about Merlin tells me he doesn’t leave tracks unless he makes a point of it.”

“I hope Jackson breaks her in half when he catches her,” Zane said, but without much passion.

“I hope *she* doesn’t break *him*,” Ralph replied morosely. “You saw what she did to his wand.”

“Don’t remind me,” James muttered. “I don’t want to think about it.” He began to walk forward, heading generally into the woods where they’d left Prechka, but with no real destination in mind. He had a terrible suspicion about where Merlin had gone, and he, James, was responsible for that. Twice, Delacroix had called him her apprentice. She had influenced him, somehow, and he’d allowed it. He had played right into her plan, bringing the robe to her. She was right. She hadn’t had to lift so much as a finger. True, things hadn’t seemed to work out very well for her in the end, but that didn’t mean much. A lone, rogue Merlin might be even more dangerous than a Merlin in league with people like the Progressive Element. At least they tried to operate under a guise of respectability. Merlin was from a different time; a more direct and

deadly time. A nearly crushing weight of guilt and hopelessness pressed down on James as he plodded forward. Zane and Ralph followed quietly.

Prechka was gone. James wasn't surprised, really. Her footprints were pressed into the dewy earth like dinosaur tracks. Without a word, the boys followed them, shivering and wet with dew. Mist filled the woods, reducing the world to a handful of black trees and dripping bushes. As they walked, the mist grew bright, absorbing the sun, and finally began to burn away. The forest awoke with bird song, and the scampering of unseen creatures in the brush. And then, surprisingly, there were distant voices, calling for them.

"Hey!" Zane said, stopping and listening. "That's Ted!"

"And Sabrina!" Ralph added. "What are they doing out here? Hey! Over here!"

The three boys stopped and called to the two Gremlins, who responded with hoots and hollers. A gigantic shape loomed out of the mist, moving almost delicately through the trees.

"Grawp!" Zane laughed, running to meet the giant.

"Boy, you three look like inferi leftovers," Ted called down from Grawp's shoulders. "You spent the whole night out here?"

"It's a long story, but yes," Zane called up. "Short version: Merlin's back, the voodoo queen's on the run, and Jackson was a good guy after all. He's after her as we speak, results unknown."

"Is there room up there for three more, Grawp?" Ralph said, shivering. "Only, I think if I have to take one more step, I'll drop dead."

Grawp knelt and the three boys clambered onto his back, crowding in with Sabrina and Ted. Before climbing up, James flexed the fingers and wrist of his right hand. There was no pain, and the bones of his arm seemed sturdy and straight. He stripped off the splint and jammed it carelessly into his pocket.

"How'd you two get out?" James asked Ted when he was crammed in next to him, holding handfuls of Grawp's straw-like hair for support. "I thought all of you were under house arrest?"

"That was last night," Ted said simply. "Things have gone pretty crazy at the school since then. Merlin showed up in the middle of the night, and let me tell you; that bloke knows how to make an entrance."

"He rode Prechka right into the courtyard and had her kick the front doors in," Sabrina explained. "He obviously speaks Giant, and he had her really wild. Then, he climbs off and just puts her to sleep. She's still there, snoring next to the main entrance like the world's largest pile of laundry."

"We all woke up when we heard the noise of the doors being smashed in," Ted went on. "After that, it was pandemonium. Students running all over the place in their night clothes, trying to figure out what's

going on. People were already pretty uptight, what with that Prescott guy still on the grounds and nobody knowing what he's up to. And then, here's this bloke who's built like a boulder and dressed like a cross between a druid and Father Christmas, stalking through the school, putting people to sleep with barely a look, clacking this enormous staff on the floor as he goes, loud enough to echo around the whole place. Then he sees Peeves and the weirdest thing happens!"

"What?" Zane asked hopefully. "Did Peeves' blow a raspberry at him and get turned into a floor lamp or something?"

"No," Sabrina said, "Peeves joined him! He didn't seem to want to, but he did anyway. Merlin stopped when he saw Peeves, and then he spoke to him. None of us knew what he was saying. It was in some really weird, flowery language. We were worried that Peeves would do something stupid and get us all zapped with that creepy staff, but then Peeves just grins, and it isn't like any of his normal grins. It's the kind of grin you see on a house elf when the master is just as prone to wallop the elf with a frying pan as look at it. A whole lot of teeth and not much humour, you know? And then Peeves swoops down next to the guy. They talk for few seconds in low voices, and then Peeves moves off, slow enough for Merlin to follow. Merlin had a place in mind he wanted to go, I guess, and Peeves took him there."

"Peeves?" Ralph said incredulously.

"I know," Ted replied. "It isn't natural. That's when we knew we were dealing with somebody really scary. Most of us Gremlins had already guessed he was Merlin, but that proved it."

"So where'd they go?" James asked in a quiet voice.

"Sylvven Tower," Sabrina answered. "At least that's what it used to be called. Nobody uses it for much anymore. Word came down that he was awaiting a 'parley with the Pendragon', whatever that means."

"I don't like the sound of that one bit," Zane said.

"Nobody does," Ted agreed. "Apparently he thinks that this 'Pendragon' is the king or leader. It's some kind of medieval challenge or something. Anyway, McGonagall gathered the faculty to go and deal with him, and that's when she realized that both Professor Jackson and Delacroix were gone. Then, word comes that you've gone missing from the hospital wing, James. Next thing we know, McGonagall is sending *us* off to find the three of you. She was too busy to come herself, but she knew if anybody could sniff you out, we could. She seems to suspect you three might know something about this 'infernal mess', as she put it. Suspicious old girl, isn't she?"

As Ted finished speaking, Grawp finally carried them out of the edge of the forest. The castle shone in the brilliant morning sunlight, its windows sparkling gaily, despite the turmoil within. The Garage of the Alma Alerons was quiet, its door flaps closed and tied shut. James remembered the time difference between the Hogwarts' and the Philadelphia side of the Garage, and knew that those on that side would still be fast asleep. When Grawp turned the corner into the courtyard, Ted called for him to lower them to the ground.

“Great job, Grawp!” Sabrina said warmly, patting the giant on his enormous shoulder. “Go take a rest with Prechka, why don’t you?” Grawp grunted agreeably and lumbered over to the she-giant, who was indeed snoring loudly next to the steps into the castle. The massive wooden doors were hanging from one hinge each, smashed inward and gaping. The entrance hall was eerily empty and silent. As they entered, Ralph gasped and grabbed James’ arm, pointing. There, lying awkwardly on the floor near the door, were Mr. Recreant and Ms. Sacarhina. Both had their eyes open and were grinning unnaturally at the ceiling. Sacarhina’s arm was outstretched, sticking up and looking pasty white in the morning light.

“Are they... d-dead?” Ralph stammered.

Ted lightly kicked Recreant’s foot. “Not likely. They’re still warm and they’re breathing. Just really, really slowly. They were apparently down here in the hall when Merlin arrived. Looks like they tried to greet him and he just zapped them, somehow. He put loads of students to sleep, but these two got some special freezing treatment. Anyway, we pulled them out of the way so people wouldn’t trip over them.” He shrugged and led them past the two prone figures, into the halls beyond the staircases.

“Where’s Sylvven Tower?” James asked as they hurried through the corridors.

“It’s the tallest tower in the old part of the castle. Narrowest, too,” Ted answered, his voice uncharacteristically somber. “Not used for much anymore except stargazing sometimes. It’s too tall and treacherous to climb. Petra says that it was an important part of the castle a long, long time ago. Every castle had one, and it was considered neutral ground, sort of like a universal embassy or something. Meetings between warring nations and kingdoms were held there, with one king on one side and the enemy king on the other. Four advisors were allowed to accompany them, but the rest had to wait below. Occasionally, wars would be decided and ended right there, sometimes with one leader killing the other and throwing the body from the top of the tower for all to see.”

James felt his heart sink even lower. “So who’s up there with him, then?”

Ted shrugged. “Dunno. We got sent off to find you three while McGonagall was still getting everybody together. I assume she meant to meet him herself. She was looking pretty peaked about it, if you ask me.”

The five students walked through a wide, low arch, entering the oldest and least used section of the castle. After several curving, narrow corridors, they finally encountered people. Students were gathered in the corridors, lining the walls and talking in hushed voices. Finally, Ted led them into a round room with a very high ceiling; so high, in fact, that it was invisible in the dark, foggy heights of the tower. The floor was crowded with students, muttering in nervous anticipation. A rickety wooden staircase spiraled up the throat of the tower. After a cursory glance upwards, Ted began to climb the stairs. James, Zane, Ralph and Sabrina followed.

“McGonagall’s up there with... *him*?” Ralph asked. “How, er, *good* is she?”

“She’s the headmistress,” Sabrina answered seriously. “She’s good.”

“I hope so,” James said quietly.

They climbed the rest of the way in silence. It took quite a long time, and James was feeling remarkably tired and achy by the time he reached the top. Ralph was wheezing behind him, pulling himself up with both hands on the thick banister. Finally, however, the stairs opened onto a room that filled the top of the tower. It was low, thick with heavy rafters and dust and centuries of owl and pigeon guano. Narrow windows marched around the perimeter of the room, revealing slices of morning sunlight. There were several people present, although none of them appeared to be the Headmistress or Merlin.

“James,” a thick voice said, and a hand fell on his shoulder. “What are you doing here? This is no place for you, I’m afraid.”

“He was summoned, Professor Slughorn,” Sabrina said, following the others into the room. “The Headmistress herself asked us to bring him, as well as Ralph and Zane. They are to go up right away.”

“Up?” Ralph wheezed. “There’s more? This isn’t the top?”

“Ah, Mr. Deedle,” Slughorn said, spying Ralph. “Yes, I am afraid there is, but only a bit more. It is directly above us. Are you quite sure about this, Miss Hildegard? This is hardly the place for children.” James thought Slughorn seemed a bit ruffled that he, Ralph and Zane might be expected to go up while Slughorn himself was not.

“You were in the room when the Headmistress sent us to find them, Professor,” Ted said, allowing a hint of sternness to creep into his voice.

“So I was,” Slughorn acknowledged, as if the fact proved little.

“Let them proceed, Horace,” Professor Flitwick said from a bench near the window. “If they are summoned, they are summoned. They are hardly any safer with us here if that savage prevails.”

Slughorn stared at James, and then, with an apparent force of will, softened his expression. He turned to Ralph and clapped him stiffly on the shoulder. “Represent us well, Mr. Deedle.”

Ted motioned toward a short stone staircase that protruded through the wooden floor and up to a trapdoor in the ceiling. James, Ralph and Zane approached and climbed the worn steps slowly. The trapdoor wasn’t locked. James pushed it open and sunlight poured in, blinding him momentarily as he climbed onto the surface above.

It was almost exactly the same size and shape as the Grotto Keep, made almost entirely of stone but for the wooden floor in the center, from which the trapdoor opened. Marble pillars surrounded the space, but there was no roof. The morning sunlight filled the top of the tower, dazzling on the white marble and

stone terraces. Merlin sat only a few feet away, facing the three boys as they emerged into the soft wind and warm sunlight. His face was stony and immobile, only his eyes moving to watch them.

“Mr. Potter,” the headmistress’ voice rang out in the stillness. “Mr. Walker and Mr. Deedle. Thank you for joining us. Please, find your places on my left. We will come to your tale shortly.”

James turned as Zane lowered the trapdoor closed. McGonagall was seated behind them, across from Merlin. She was dressed in a flame red robe both far graver and more ostentatious than James had ever seen her wear. It made her look both younger and dreadful, like a sort of tyrant queen. The chairs that she and Merlin sat upon were embedded in the stone of the lowest terrace, so that both looked at each other across the wooden floor in the center. On McGonagall’s left, arranged along the rim of the highest terrace, were four more carved seats, although they were much less ornate. Seated on them were Neville Longbottom, Professor Franklyn, and Harry Potter.

“Dad!” James breathed, a smile of relief and joy surfacing on his face. He ran up the steps toward his father.

“James,” Harry said quietly, his face grim, “I was told you had gone missing. You had us very worried. I would have gone after the three of you myself, except that we received word you’d been found only moments after I arrived.”

“How did you find out?” Ralph asked, furrowing his brow.

Harry allowed a crooked smile and held up a Weasley rubber duck. On the bottom, Ted’s handwriting was scrawled: *found them! Be there straight off!* “This is Petra Morganstern’s, but she said they got the idea from you three. Very handy.”

“I’m sorry I took the Map and your cloak, Dad,” James said in a rush. “I know I shouldn’t have. I really made a mess of things. Merlin’s back and it’s all my fault.”

Harry darted his eyes meaningfully at the chairs in the center of the space. “Don’t be too hard on yourself, my boy. We’ll have loads of time to discuss this later. For now, I think we have other matters to attend to.”

James turned back toward the headmistress and Merlin. He’d nearly forgotten about them in the excitement and relief of seeing his dad. “Sure. Sorry.” The three boys remained standing along the top terrace, next to Harry, Neville and Franklyn. James noticed for the first time that the opposite side of the terrace was occupied by a surprising number of birds and creatures, all of which were staring hard at Merlin. There were owls and pigeons, ravens and even a few falcons, all arranged on the ledge of the railing, on the four carved seats, and on the floor of the top two terraces. Sitting incongruously among them, also staring at the bearded man, were a variety of creatures James recognized as House animals. Frogs and rats jostled slightly among the birds. Even Zane’s cat, Thumbs, was there, sitting near the front, his black and white nose twitching slightly.



“You were saying, Professor Longbottom?” McGonagall said, her gaze still locked on the huge, unmoving form of Merlin.

Neville stirred and stood. “I simply wish to register my objection to your speaking to this... this intruder, who has violently entered this school with who knows what nefarious purpose in mind, in a language that we, your long time associates and friends, cannot understand or follow. Between that and your, I must admit, surprising attire... well, surely you must know how this looks to us.”

“I apologize, Mr. Longbottom, and the rest of you,” McGonagall said, finally looking away from Merlin and meeting the eyes of those gathered to her left. “I had forgotten myself. This gentleman comes from a time of formality and ritual. I am meeting him as he expects to be met, in the ceremonial robe of my station. I am afraid that when he first found us, he assumed that all of us, including myself and the faculty, were peasants who had somehow managed to overrun the castle. It was extremely unbecoming in his time for the Pendragon to appear in the sort of colorless sacks that he mistook our robes for. As for the language...”

“I can speak in the language of your servants, if you wish it, Madam Pendragon,” Merlin interrupted in his low, carrying voice. “Although why you deign to speak to them as equals when they should be stropped for such impertinence, I cannot guess.”

McGonagall sighed and closed her eyes. James had the sense that these sorts of misunderstandings had been going on for some time. “These are my associates, not my underlings, sir. This is a different time, as I fear I must keep reminding you. I am not the Pendragon of a kingdom. I am Pendragon only of a tiny portion of land, all of which is within sight of this tower. But yes, please do speak so that all of us may understand.”

“As you wish, Madam,” Merlin answered. “I assume your council is fully present, then?”

“It is. James Potter, Ralph Deedle, Zane Walker,” the headmistress said, looking at each boy in turn. “This man claims to be Merlinus Ambrosius, returned to the world of men from an age of nothingness, by the combined arrangement of his ghostly apprentice and five other individuals. What can you tell us of this tale?”

James answered, explaining, as well and honestly as he could how the three Merlin relics came to be combined in the island of the Grotto Keep. He was careful to proclaim, to his own shame, how Professor Jackson had meant to protect the robe and keep it from the Grotto, foiling Madame Delacroix’s plan, but that James had inadvertently ruined his intentions.

“It was my fault,” he explained miserably. “Ralph and Zane only helped because I talked them into it. I wanted to...” he paused and swallowed. “I wanted to save the day, I guess. But I ruined everything. I’m sorry.”

McGonagall’s face was calm but unreadable as James finished. He hung his head, but a moment later he felt his dad’s hand on his shoulder, warm and heavy. He sighed.



Merlin let his gaze sweep over the gathering on and near the benches, then he slowly filled his chest. “Austramaddux’s plan abused the intentions of many, I see; some good and some bad. I assume, however, that after this boy’s testimony there is no doubt about my identity. Allow me to repeat, then: I have been, it seems, the subject of a very dire campaign of lies and slander. It has apparently become accepted lore that I was, in my own time, a capricious and dishonorable creature, a man of selfish alliances and endless guile. This is no more true than the litany of virtues embroidered into the history of this Voldemort villain you have described to me. I was no more evil than a storm is evil. I killed only when there was no hope of repentance or slavery. I collected dues only from those who deserved to pay, and even then, a third of my purse went to the poor and the church. I am no horror to be sought after by the pathetic creatures whom you gratuitously call ‘evil’, whose own wickedness is hardly a candle to the torches of iniquity I have observed in my own time.”

“I’ve no doubt you believe that,” McGonagall stated, “but surely you know that the legends of the dark heart of the world’s most powerful wizard began even before you stepped outside of your own time, while you still walked the earth. Many lived in fear of you.”

“Only those whose wickedness or ignorance lent them to that error,” Merlin rumbled. “And even in their case, I would more likely have approached them with the rod instead of the sword.”

“That may be so, Merlinus, but you yourself know that you dabbled in arts that, while technically allowed in your time, were not *very* allowed. You exposed yourself to currents of magic that separated you from the rest of humanity; currents that were, in fact, more than most human beings could touch and remain sane. You were changed by that dabbling. Perhaps even warped by it. Even you must have doubted your own judgment at times. The ambiguous morality of Merlinus Ambrosius was well known, as was his cavalier attitude towards the lives of the nonmagicked. It was legitimately suspected that you might side with those who wished the destruction and subjugation of the Muggle realm. I cannot speak for your own time, but in ours, those who wish war upon the Muggle world are our sworn enemies. Your allegiance must be decided before we can allow you to leave these halls.”

“You dare to challenge the nobility of such as me?” Merlin asked, his voice smooth and calm. “And to suggest that I could not merely wipe you all from the earth with a sweep of my arm if I so wished?”

“I dare to do both, and for good reason,” McGonagall said firmly. “You were of questionable motive in your own time, as even the best historians agree. You remain so in this time. And in regard to your powers, they may be formidable, but even in your time, the current from which you drew your power was waning as the earth was tamed. Don’t pretend that that wasn’t your greatest reason for stepping out of time. You hoped to return to an age when the current of the earth was restored, when your power would once again be uninterrupted and complete. But this is not that time. The current is more parsed than ever. Your power may still be great, and you might indeed defeat those gathered here, but you are by no means unstoppable. Choose carefully with whom you ally in this age, Merlinus.”

Merlin's face remained as impassive as stone as he stared at the headmistress. "I have truly returned to a time of darkness if the Pendragon believes that a mere threat of doom might sway the convictions of an honorable wizard. But I see that you are honest in your motive, even if your methods are mean. I have never foresworn allegiance to any whose hearts were turned hard against the nonmagicked. I worked to maintain the balance between the magickal and Muggle worlds, to keep the scales from tipping one toward the other, though none would have guessed my true aims. I serviced all, but always with that goal in my heart. Fairness is a myth among a fallen humankind, but equality of struggle can be maintained, even if it is only a pale ghost of true fairness."

"You speak well, Merlinus," the Headmistress said, "But you have not stated your purpose plainly. Are you here to overthrow us, or to work alongside us?"

For the first time, Merlin's face showed emotion. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. His beard glistened with what James assumed was some sort of oil. Occasionally, the scent of it, wild and spicy, wafted in the breeze of the tower's top. "Austramaddux deserved the fate I dealt him, and perhaps a hundredfold, for returning me to this time." He opened his eyes again, and looked around at the assembly. "I approach a castle of the most solid construction I've ever witnessed, filled with glittering eyes of hardened sunlight, and yet I find no sentry, no vanguard, not so much as a servant to fill my bath or demand protocol. You meet me with no recognition of my status and no blessing upon my head, wearing the clothes of jesters and field boys, and yet you are surrounded by tables of plenty, on plates as round and smooth as the planets. The Pendragon herself is not revered or waited upon, but dresses like her minions in shapeless bags of tenting. And then, above all, my honor and allegiance is challenged, when I myself only refrain from demanding tribute out of respect for a foreign age. Truly, my mission has become as dust. There is no age ripe for me."

"Selfish Austramaddux may have been," McGonagall agreed, leaning slightly forward, "But it may not be a mistake that you were returned to this time, Merlinus. It was thought that you would lead the rebellion against the Muggle world, but if your claims are true, then you may have been brought here by an even greater providence so that you might aid us in preventing just such a tragedy. Even now, the powers of chaos have set in motion events that will lead to that end. This very day, a man resides among us, a Muggle man. He has been led here by agents of disorder, and he has bypassed our greatest defenses using a form of unmagic called 'technology'. He has access to an engine called 'the press' by which he can make known the secrets of the magical world to the rest of humanity. It is only by maintaining that secret for the past millennium that the balance of powers has existed. If this man and his secret plotters succeed, they will abuse the recombination of the magical and Muggle world. They will plot divisions, seek power, and eventually, they will spawn a war. You, more than anyone, know what the result of such a scheme would be. You must help us. Those who plot chaos are expecting you. Let them eat the fire they intended to turn upon the world, Merlinus. Aid us."

Merlin sat perfectly still for almost a minute, his beard glistening in the sun. The animals fidgeted slightly, noses twitching and feathers ruffling. Finally, Merlin stood, and it was like watching a mountain rise

from its foundation. He moved with slow, massive grace until he was fully erect, his staff held up-right next to him, his piercing blue eyes settling on the headmistress.

“You are correct, Madam,” Merlin said, his voice flat and undeniable. “It was my selfish aim to leave my own age only to find a time when my power would be restored in fullness. Arrogance is my iniquity, and it has undone me. I have returned now only to find my power cut to pieces, far more than it was in my own time. I beg your forgiveness, as a man of honour, but I am both unable and unwilling to rise to the post you have described for me. This is no longer my world. Perhaps you will prevail without me. Perhaps not. I cannot see any future in this time apart from knowing that the sun will arise tomorrow and travel across the heavens as it has done for the thousand years of my absence. Whether it shines down on war or peace, truth or lies, I know not, but I do know this: it will shine upon a world that knows me not, nor I it. I take my leave of you now, Madam. I bid all of you: fare thee well.”

Merlin raised his arms, holding his staff aloft. As one, the birds on the railings and benches launched from their perches. There was a thunderous sound as hundreds of wings beat the air. When the mass of birds broke apart, streaming from the top of the tower in all directions, there was no sign of Merlin.

James stared hard at the space where the great wizard had been standing. It was over. There was nothing left. Harry turned James around and folded him into his arms. “It’s all right, son,” he said. James didn’t believe anything was all right, but he was glad for the words anyway. He hugged his dad back.



“I wonder if he’s really gone for good,” Neville mused out loud.

“I’ve no doubt he means for us to believe that,” The headmistress replied, arising from her chair on the tower platform. “But the fact of the matter is that he has nowhere to go. His servant, Austramaddux, has apparently been banished to the Netherworld, thus Merlinus has no apprentice in this age to arrange for his reappearance if he should choose to step out of time again. I fear we must assume that Merlinus is with us, for better or worse. Mr. Potter, can he be tracked?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Difficult, but not impossible. He will probably retreat to the protection of the woodlands, where his power is strongest. No doubt he has many methods of surviving and hiding there, but a wizard of such abilities will always leave a detectable magical wake. I believe we can locate him, given a team of aurors and enough time. The question is: what do we do with him when we find him?”

“We must secure his intent,” Franklyn said somberly, slowly approaching the chair Merlin had occupied. “Merlinus is a creature of mystery and confusion. Despite his words, I sense that he himself does not trust his own allegiances. Things were much clearer in his time. Did you sense it as well? He is unsure in this age. He doesn’t know who to trust, whose aims most reflect his own. This is made worse by the fact that, as you pointed out, headmistress, Merlin’s own morality is ambiguous at best. He retreats now in order to examine his own heart as much as to study the factions of this age.”

“Do you really believe that, Professor?” Harry asked.

Franklyn had produced the same brass device he’d used to examine James’ broken arm on the Quidditch pitch. He was peering through it, studying the chair Merlin had occupied. He nodded slowly. “I do. Merlin admitted to us that pride is his greatest weakness. He cannot allow us to see his own lack of surety. But there is no doubt of it. He doesn’t know where he stands in this age because he doesn’t know where he stands in his own heart, and only now does he realize it.”

“That doubt won’t last forever, though,” Neville said, stepping down the terraces toward the wooden floor. “We can hardly sit back and wait until he decides whose side to join. His power may be diminished, but I’d wager he is still unmatched by any single wizard alive today. We have to assume he is with our enemies until he determines he is our ally.”

Harry was shaking his head. “I agree that he may be unsure in this time, but I don’t think he’s evil. Or at least, not willfully evil.”

“What do you mean?” Zane interjected. “He’s been sought after by the most evil wizards for the past thousand years or so, hasn’t he?”

“Not the *most* evil wizards,” McGonagall said pointedly.

“That’s true,” Harry agreed. “Only those who were confused or warped enough to believe their aims were good, somehow. Those who knew their hearts were evil, whose eyes were open to their own wickedness and embraced it, they never sought him. At least, as far as we know.”

“Let us repair to our offices for now,” McGonagall said, sighing. “Our day has barely begun and we already have far more to manage than we rightly know how. Besides, I wish to alleviate myself of this unbearable costume as soon as possible.”

Franklyn heaved the trapdoor open and the group began to file down the steps. The animals that had gathered on the tower platform threaded down as well, scampering and hopping around the groups’ feet.

Slughorn and the rest of the professors gathered below greeted them with worried faces and a flurry of questions. Ignoring them, James followed his dad down the spiral steps toward the far distant floor.

“How’d you get here so fast, Dad?” he asked. “Merlin didn’t get here until the middle of the night. How’d McGonagall get hold of you so quickly?”

“It wasn’t the headmistress that brought me here, James,” Harry replied, glancing over his shoulder at his son. “It was your letter. Nobby delivered it this morning, and I came as soon as I read it. The headmistress was as surprised as anyone when I showed up in her office fireplace.”

“But Sacarhina said you were off on some special assignment and weren’t to be bothered!”

Harry laughed humorlessly. “It was that detail in your letter that proved I needed to get here right away, James. I’m doing nothing but desk work this week. If Sacarhina says I’m on assignment, that’s just because she wants to make sure I’m *not here*.”

“Yeah,” James nodded. “The portrait of Snape told us Sacarhina and Recreant are both no good. They’re in on all this Progressive Element stuff.”

Harry stopped on the stairs, turning back to James, Ralph and Zane. “Be careful who you mention that to,” he said, lowering his voice. “The Ministry is riddled with people like Recreant and Sacarhina these days, although for most of them it’s just a way to appear a little daring and trendy. Hermione does what she can to fight the propaganda and weed out the instigators, but it’s complicated. Recreant is only a tool, but Sacarhina is dangerous. I think she’s the mastermind behind the return of Merlin, in fact.”

“What?” James said, dropping his voice to match his dad’s. “That can’t be. It was Madame Delacroix in the Grotto last night.”

“Yeah, Sacarhina didn’t even arrive until yesterday evening,” Zane added.

Harry’s expression was grave. “Sacarhina isn’t the kind of person to get her hands dirty with any of the actual work. She needed Delacroix for that, and Delacroix herself couldn’t have gotten the Merlin Throne out of the Ministry without Sacarhina on the inside, helping her. Recreant and Sacarhina are only here now because they claim to be escorting an ‘expert in Muggle-magical relations’ to deal with this Prescott person. There is no such expert. They were expecting to produce Merlin himself, and pass him off as that expert.”

“So they never *intended* to stop Prescott from revealing the magical world to the Muggle press!” Ralph said, his face white. “Sacarhina and Merlin were supposed to work together to make *sure* Prescott got his story out, weren’t they?”

Harry nodded. “That’s what I think. This is all no coincidence. It’s exactly the sort of thing people like Sacarhina have been hoping for all along. The recombination of the Muggle and magical world is essential to their final plan for all-out war.”

“But Merlin turned out to be on nobody’s side but his own, after all,” James said. “Does that ruin their plan?”

“I don’t know,” Harry sighed. “Things have been put in motion that will be very hard to stop now. Sacarhina may no longer need Merlin for this part of the plan.”

Zane asked, “So how are you planning to stop Prescott?”

“Stop him? I’m not even supposed to be here, remember? Sacarhina is in charge.”

“But she’s evil!” James exclaimed. “You can’t just let her run the show!”

“We won’t, James,” Harry said, putting a hand on James’ shoulder but hardening his voice. “But we have to be very careful. Sacarhina has a lot of influence in the Ministry. I can’t just defy her. She’s *hoping* that I’ll do something rash, something she can use against me. She wants the Department of Aurors shut down entirely. Keeping that from happening is of utmost importance. Even more so than protecting the secrecy of the magical world.”

“So Sacarhina and Delacroix win?” James said, looking his dad in the eye.

“In the short run, perhaps. But don’t lose hope, any of you. Neville, the headmistress and I have a few tricks up our sleeves. We will survive the day, no matter what happens with Prescott. The only question now is who led him here in the first place?”

“Well, it would’ve been Sacarhina, wouldn’t it?” Zane suggested.

“No, couldn’t be,” James sighed. “She’s signed the vow of secrecy, just like every other witch and wizard. If she’d tried to tell Prescott anything, even through a letter, the vow would have stopped her somehow. Besides, she wouldn’t know anything about how a GameDeck worked, or how it could be used to lead somebody to Hogwarts.”

Voices and footsteps echoed from the spiral of stairs above them. The headmistress and the professors were descending behind them. Harry gestured for the boys to follow him the rest of the way down.

“That’s the only part of this that really baffles me,” Harry said as he tromped down the stairs. “Every witch and wizard is bound by the vow of secrecy. Any Muggle parent of a student is bound by their own contract of non-disclosure. That means no one who knows about the magical world would be capable of spreading the secret. And yet, someone obviously did. I intend to find out who.”

By the time they neared the last curve of the staircase, the headmistress, Neville, and the rest of the professors had caught up to them. McGonagall called down to the students who were waiting below.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, as you can see, we are all returning to you whole and well.” She stopped and regarded the assembly from above. “In order to dispel rumors and quell any fears, I intend to be quite forthright about what has been, and still is, occurring here today. Two men have found their ways rather

unexpectedly into these halls over the course of the last two days. The first is still here. His name is Martin Prescott and he is a Muggle. His intentions are quite questionable, but I can assure you that we, your faculty, are prepared to-

"Thank you, Minerva," a high, ringing voice interrupted. "I have, in fact, already briefed the students on today's events. I appreciate your thoroughness, however. Do join us, won't you?" Sacarhina and Recreant stepped out of the crowd of students and moved to the head of the staircase. Sacarhina's smile was large and glinting in the dusty light of the tower floor. McGonagall stared down at her for a long moment, and then turned to address the students again. "In that case, I expect you all have classes to attend to. Your professors shall kindly lead you to your classrooms. Let us make what we can with the rest of the day, shall we?"

"Do you really believe it is necessary for classes to go forward today, Minerva?" Sacarhina said when the headmistress and the rest of the troupe reached the bottom of the steps. "This is rather an unusual day."

"Unusual days are the best days for classes, Miss Sacarhina," McGonagall replied, stepping past the woman. "Reminds everyone why we are here in the first place. If you'll excuse me."

"Harry," Mr. Recreant said, smiling a bit too enthusiastically. "I admit, Brenda and I hadn't expected to see you here today. Family occasion, is it?" He turned his grin on James, and then flashed it over Ralph and Zane as well.

Harry smiled stiffly. "I'm equally surprised to see the two of you here. I didn't see any paperwork about a return trip to meet with the Alma Alerons. And I've been doing an awful lot of paperwork, as you know."

Sacarhina took Harry's arm, and he allowed her to lead him out of the tower, following the last of the students. "Very unexpected, this is," she said in a confidential tone of voice. "Dreadful situation. Surely Minerva told you about it? Martin Prescott, a Muggle reporter, right here on the grounds. Still, the Ministry feels it is inevitable, really."

"Does it?" Harry said, stopping near the door and facing Sacarhina. "So, Loquacious Knapp knows about this?"

"The Minister is aware of the general direction events have been leading," Recreant interjected, "We hadn't chosen to bother him with the particulars, per se."

"So he doesn't, in fact, know you are here?" Harry said, dropping his thin smile.

"Harry," Sacarhina said silkily, "the fact is that this sort of scenario is exactly the purview of the Department of Ambassadorial relations. You, of course, do not require the signature of the Minister for every little maneuver of the Department of Aurors. Nor do we require his approval when dealing with the execution of *our* daily duties. Do you intend to stay for the day?"



“I believe so, Brenda,” Harry answered calmly. “I am curious to see what the Department of Ambassadorial Relations does to execute its daily duties in such a situation. Besides, surely you’d agree that an outside, *objective* witness might prove helpful in case of any... inquiries?”

“Suit yourself, Mr. Potter,” Sacarhina said, her smile snapping shut like a jewelry box. “It will all be over by four o’clock this afternoon. Prescott’s crew will arrive and they will get their tour. There is hardly any way to prevent it, after all, considering Mr. Prescott’s very ingenious fail-safes. You may accompany us, but please do not attempt to interfere. It would not go well for you. But I am sure I do not need to tell you that, do I?”

“Did you have a nice snooze down there by the front doors?” Zane said lightly as Sacarhina turned away. She stopped, and then very slowly turned back toward Zane.

“Whatever could you mean, young man?” she asked. Harry was looking at Zane with a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

Zane went on, “You two were both down there to meet Merlin when he made his grand entrance last night, but he was apparently looking for bigger fish than you, wasn’t he? He gave you both the old evil eye and froze you on the spot. Come on, now, that’s gotta *hurt*.”

Sacarhina’s smile eased back onto her face, as if it was the default expression at times when her brain was working hard on something else. Her eyes moved back to Harry. “I simply don’t know what you’ve been filling these poor children’s heads with, Mr. Potter, but it really doesn’t do for Ministry officials to tell such stories. Merlin, of all things.” She shook her head vaguely, then turned and walked through the archway with Mr. Recreant following nervously.

“You sure have a way with people, Zane,” Harry said, grinning and ruffling the boy’s hair.

“My dad says it’s a gift,” Zane agreed. “My mom says it’s a curse. Who can tell?”

“It looked like Miss Sacarhina was more confused than angry,” Ralph mused as they walked through the archway leaving the Sylvven Tower.

“Could be,” Harry replied. “It might be that everyone Merlin put to sleep forgot about him as well. She may have no recollection of his coming last night.”

“So she still expects him to show up when she takes Prescott and his crew on the grand tour?”

“Perhaps. Although it won’t trip her up for long when he doesn’t show. Merlin’s probably halfway across the Forbidden Forest by now, getting directions from the tree sprites, now that they’re apparently awakened.”

James stopped in the middle of the corridor. A few paces later, Harry stopped as well and turned to look back at his son. James’ face was wide-eyed and thoughtful. Suddenly, he blinked and looked at his dad.

"I need to go to the Forbidden Forest," he said. "It's not too late. Dad, will you come with me? Zane, Ralph, you too?"

Harry didn't ask his son any questions. He studied James' face for several seconds, and then glanced down at Zane and Ralph. "What do you two think? You up for playing a little hooky?"



James walked purposefully into the forest, followed at a short distance by Harry, Zane and Ralph. He threaded through the smaller trees at the perimeter, heading into the deeper heart of the forest, where the trees were huge and ancient and the sun was all but blocked out by rafters of dense foliage. For several minutes, the foursome walked in silence, and then, finally, James stopped. He turned on the spot, looking up into the shushing leaves and gently creaking branches. There were no other sounds. Harry, Zane and Ralph stood twenty feet away, watching quietly. James closed his eyes for a moment, thinking, and then opened them again and spoke.

"I know a lot of you aren't awake," he began, looking up into the looming heights of the trees, "and I know that some of you who are awake aren't on our side. But the ones who will hear me, and I hope you'll help. Merlin is out there somewhere. He may be far, far away by now, but even so, I think you know where he is. He talks to you, and I am betting you talk to him, too. I know tree sprites can talk, because we've already met one of you. I have a message for Merlin."

James stopped and took another deep breath, not entirely sure what he meant to say. It had simply occurred to him that he should try. He had been used by Delacroix to help bring Merlin into the world, despite the best efforts of those who'd wished to prevent it. The knowledge that he'd allowed himself to be manipulated was horrible to him. All this time, he'd believed he was doing good, saving the world from evil, walking in the steps of his hero father. And yet his best intentions had been warped against him, against the world he'd hoped to protect. He'd tried to do it alone, like his dad had done, but he'd failed. He'd aided evil. And now evil expected him to give up. James didn't intend to give up, though. Maybe now he could try to help in a different way. It was probably a long shot, probably utterly hopeless, but he had to try. Maybe this was *his* way, after all.

"Merlin," James said uncertainly, "You said that Austramaddux made a mistake in bringing you to our time. You said he was selfish, that he just wanted to get out of the duty he swore to you. But

headmistress McGonagall thinks that you're wrong. She thinks that this is the very time you were meant to return to, because this world needs your help to stop a war that might destroy us all. Well... I know I'm just a kid, but I think you're *both* wrong."

James glanced back at his dad. Harry gave a small shrug and nodded.

"I listened to everything you said, and what everybody said after you left, and I think you were brought to this time because *you* need something. You don't know for sure if you've really ever done right or wrong. You don't know if you controlled your powers, or if they controlled you. I think the truth is that the world *does* need you now, but that *you* need this world, too. This is your chance- maybe your last chance- to prove that you are a good wizard after all. People have wondered for centuries whether you were good or bad, but who cares what the rest of history says about you? If you know in your own heart that you did the right thing when it really mattered, then it doesn't matter what anybody else says. I don't say this because I understand it myself yet, but at least I'm trying to learn it. You're in this time no matter what, Merlin. Whoever brought you here means for you to rescue the world, but... I think you're also here to be rescued from yourself."

James finished and sighed. He looked up, craning his neck and squinting, searching the trees for some sign that his message had been heard, and that it might be delivered. The leaves simply continued to skirl and shush in the breeze. The branches creaked quietly to themselves. After a minute, James stuffed his hands into his pockets and walked disconsolately back to his dad, Ralph and Zane.

Zane clapped James on the shoulder as they turned to leave. "That was the hokiest pile of salami I've ever heard," he said jovially. "But I think you meant it. I liked it, even if it never does get to Merlin's ears."

"Did you come up with that all by yourself?" Ralph asked. James shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

Harry didn't say anything as they walked, but he put his arm around James' shoulder and kept it there the whole way back. James thought it meant his dad approved, even if it wasn't the way he himself would have done it. And then James realized, with some contentment, that his dad approved *because* it wasn't the way he'd have done it. James smiled and enjoyed that moment of quiet revelation. Maybe learning this truth- the sort of truth that one has to learn on his own, despite all the people who'd tried to teach it with mere words- was worth everything that had happened so far. He only hoped that it was worth more than what might still be to come.