



## 20. TALE OF THE TRAITOR

“But, I saw them!” Prescott said insistently, his voice growing rather hoarse as he followed Vince between the Landrovers. “Giants! One of them was as tall as the trees! They made footprints the size of... the size of...!” He gestured with his arms desperately. Ignoring him, Vince packed his camera into a foam-lined suitcase.

“You’ve made quite a fiasco for yourself, Mr. Prescott,” Detective Finney said, polishing his glasses on his tie. “Don’t make it any worse.”

Prescott turned to the older man, his eyes wild. “You’ve got to investigate this establishment, Detective! It’s not right! They’ve tricked you all!”

“If I spearhead any investigations, Mr. Prescott,” Finney said mildly, “they’ll be investigations of you and your methods. Did you have permission to trespass on these grounds in the first place?”

“What, are you mad?” Prescott sputtered. He stopped and collected himself. “Of course. As I’ve already told you, I was tipped off about what was happening here. Someone on the inside led me here.”

“And you checked the background of this person?”

“Well,” Prescott said, “the chocolate frog was pretty convincing. I didn’t really...”

“Excuse me. Did you just say ‘the chocolate frog?’” Finney asked, his eyes narrowing.

“I... er, well. The point is, yes, my source was quite certain that something strange was going on here...”

“That they were, in fact, teaching magic?”

“Yes. Er, no! Not tricks! *Real* magic! With monsters and giants and... and... vanishing doorways and flying cars!”

“And the chocolate frog confirmed this, did he?”

Prescott opened his mouth to answer, and then stopped. He straightened to his full height, angry and indignant. “You’re making fun of me.”

“You make it hard not to, sir. Would you be willing to let me speak to this source of yours?”

Prescott brightened. “Yes! In fact, I would! I arranged with Miss Sacarhina for him to come along. He’s right over...” He glanced around, his brow furrowing.

“You arranged with Miss Sacarhina?” Finney asked, glancing up toward the top of the courtyard steps. Much of the school faculty, as well as a number of students, were watching with benign interest as the crew industriously packed their gear. Neither Miss Sacarhina nor Mr. Recreant was in sight. “She knows this source of yours, does she?”

“She knows him, all right,” Prescott said, still scanning the crowd. “Where is he?”

“He came with the crew?” Finney asked, glancing around. “I don’t remember meeting him.”

“He was there. Quiet, squirrely fellow. Had a twitch in his right eyebrow.”

“Ah, him,” Finney nodded. “I thought he was a little odd. I’d very much like to have a word with him.”

“So would I,” Prescott agreed darkly.

On the top of the steps, Mr. Hubert turned toward Headmistress McGonagall, Neville and Harry Potter. “I think we can trust our friends to manage their departure from here. Madam Headmistress, I believe we have a few loose ends to attend to?”

McGonagall nodded, then turned and led the group inside. Harry smiled down at James. “Come along, James. Ralph and Zane, you too.”

“Are you sure?” Ralph asked, glancing up at the headmistress as she strode into the hall.

“Mr. Hubert’ specifically asked for you three to accompany us,” Harry replied.

“Nice to have friends in high places, isn’t it?” Zane said happily.

“Well,” the headmistress said as they entered the empty silence of the Great Hall, “that went as well as could be expected, even if Mr. Ambrosius was a little heavy-handed with his amorous charm. Mr. Finney has *insisted* that I join him for dinner next time I find myself in London.”

“An offer I believe you should take him up on, Madam,” Merlin replied, taking off the gigantic horn-rimmed glasses and shaking his hair out of the ‘Mr. Hubert’ pony tail. “I enchanted him with the slightest possible charm. How could I have known that Detective Finney would have a natural predilection for tall, strong, handsome women?”

“How indeed,” McGonagall answered. “I believe you are grinning, sir.”

James spoke up. “But how’d you know about the Garage, Merlin? I thought for sure we were sunk!”

Merlin glanced back over his shoulder. “I didn’t know about the Garage, James Potter. It was beyond the knowledge of the trees, unlike the Anglia vehicle and Madame Delacroix. Improvisation, however, has always been one of my stronger talents.”

“But how’d you get the Wocket in there?” Ralph asked. “That was totally brilliant!”

“The trees knew about *that*, therefore I did as well,” Merlin replied. “It was simply a matter of encouraging an exchange of environments.”

Zane grinned. “So the Alma Aleron’s cars are out in that old barn in the field?”

“It’ll do them some good, I expect,” Merlin nodded.

The group walked purposefully through the Great Hall and climbed the stairs onto the dais. McGonagall opened a door in the rear wall and led the others through, into a large antechamber with a stone floor and a dark fireplace. Sacarhina and Recreant were there, sitting on either side of a third person James didn’t recognize.

“This is an outrage, Headmistress,” Recreant said, leaping to his feet. “First, you bring in this... *person* to usurp our authority, and then you have the gall to perform the langlock curse on us! The Minister will-“

“Do shut up, Trenton,” Sacarhina said, rolling her eyes. Recreant blinked, wounded, but clamped his mouth shut. He looked back and forth from Sacarhina to the Headmistress.

“Wise advice, if ever I heard it,” Harry agreed, stepping forward. “And I suspect that the Minister will, in fact, hear about this.”

“We’ve done nothing wrong, Mr. Potter, as you know,” Sacarhina said, glancing idly at her fingernails. “Mr. Ambrosius’ appearance has secured the secrecy of the magical world. All is well.”

Harry nodded. “I am glad you feel that way, Brenda, although I find it interesting that you already seem to know ‘Mr. Hubert’s’ real name. No doubt there will be no link proven to connect him, you and the unfortunate Madame Delacroix. What are we to make of your friend, here, however?”

All attention turned to the man seated in the chair between Sacarhina and Recreant. He was small, pudgy, with thinning black hair and a twitch in his right eyebrow. He shrunk from the gaze of everyone in the room.

Ralph, who’d been the last to enter, pushed his way between Merlin and Professor Longbottom, his brow furrowed in bewilderment. “Dad?” he said, frowning. “What are *you* doing here?”

The man grimaced miserably and covered his face with his hands. Merlin looked down at Ralph, his large, stony face somber. He placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “This man says his name is Dennis Deedle. I was afraid you’d recognize him.”

“What *is* he doing here?” Neville asked.

“I think his role in this debacle is fairly evident,” the Headmistress replied, sighing. “He is the man responsible for leading Mr. Prescott into our midst.”

“What?” Ralph said, rounding on McGonagall. “Why would you say that? That’s terrible!”

“He came with Mr. Prescott’s crew,” Harry said quietly. “He was trying to remain unobtrusive. Perhaps he was worried that you’d recognize him, Ralph. Later, when it was all over, it wouldn’t have mattered, of course. But then again, things didn’t happen as he expected.”

“This is ridiculous,” Ralph insisted. “Dad’s a Muggle! He signed the Muggle’s non-disclosure contract, didn’t he? He wouldn’t do this, even if he could! I don’t know what he’s doing here, but it isn’t what you all think!”

Merlin still had his hand on Ralph’s shoulder. He patted him slowly. “Perhaps you should ask him yourself, then, Mr. Deedle.”

Ralph glanced up at the enormous wizard, his face pinched with anger and trepidation. He looked around the rest of the room, from face to face, ending with his father. “All right, then. Dad, why are you here?”

Dennis Deedle still had his hands on his face. For several seconds, he didn’t move. Finally, he took a huge breath and sat back, dropping his hands. He looked at Ralph for a long moment, and then glanced around at everyone assembled.

“All right. Yes,” he said, having composed himself. “I told Prescott. I sent him the chocolate frog and the GameDeck. I’d used it to communicate with somebody on the school grounds, somebody who went by the name Austramaddux. Once I’d done that, I knew that Prescott could locate the school with his GPS.”

Ralph’s face was frozen with disbelief and misery. “But why, Dad? Why would you do such a thing?”

“Oh, Ralph. I’m sorry. I know this looks bad to you,” Dennis said. “But it’s all very... very complicated. Prescott’s show, *Inside View*, they offer money for proof of the supernatural. Well, we haven’t been doing all that well, son. I’ve been looking for work ever since I got laid off, but it’s been hard. We needed the money. I thought the chocolate frog would be enough. I really did! But Prescott wanted more. I knew I’d have to show him something really amazing, so...” He faltered, glancing nervously around the room again.

“But you never got the money,” Merlin said in his low, rumbling voice. “And that wasn’t the real point, was it?”

Dennis’ eyebrows worked furiously as he gazed up at Merlin, apparently struggling with what to say. Next to him, Sacarhina cleared her throat meaningfully. Dennis glanced at her, taking his eyes from Merlin. “The money,” he said uncertainly. “Prescott said we’d get it when the program aired. He promised.”

“But there will be no program now,” Merlin said quietly.

“You thought it’d be worth selling out the whole magical world just to help us get by for awhile, Dad?” Ralph said, his voice not accusing but truly questioning. It broke James’ heart to hear the disappointment in the boy’s voice.

“No, son!” Dennis answered, but then looked away. “I didn’t think it’d threaten the whole magical world. I mean, it’s just a stupid television show. Besides...” he stopped, chewing on his words, wrestling with himself.

“Besides what?” Merlin asked calmly.

Dennis looked back at Merlin, his face tense, his right eyebrow twitching. “Besides, what did the magical world ever do for *me*?” he spat, then covered his face with his hands again. He took a deep, shuddering breath. “Left me all alone, that’s what. Shunned and abandoned, like some kind of... some kind of worthless mutant! Stripped of my name and my family, abandoned by my own parents because I wasn’t like them! I was forbidden to ever contact them or speak of them again. They said I’d be adopted into the Muggle world, where I belonged. They said I’d be happier there. Well, I guess I showed them, didn’t I? They didn’t want me to ruin their reputation in the magical world. Well, why should I care about the secrecy of the magical world at all?”

Ralph's face was a mask of unhappy consternation. "What are you talking about, Dad? You're not a wizard. Grandma and Grandpa died before I was born. You were as surprised as me when we got the letter from Hogwarts."

Dennis tried to smile at his son. "I'd almost forgotten about my own past, Ralph. It had been so long, and I'd tried so hard to bury it. I'm a squib, son. Your grandparents and your uncle were witches and wizards, but I wasn't born with their powers. They raised me for as long as they could, but they hated my nature. When I came of age and they could see for sure that I didn't have any magical skills, they couldn't bear it. They hid me from the rest of the magical world. I was their ugly little secret. But they couldn't hide me forever. Finally, when I was twelve, they sent me away. I went to a Muggle orphanage, under the pretense that my parents had died in an accident. They made me vow never to mention them and never to try and seek them. My mother was... she was sad. She cried and hid her face from me. But my father was hard. She couldn't budge him. He rented a Muggle driver to take us to the orphanage. Mother stayed in the car when my father took me inside. She tried to embrace me, to say goodbye, but Father wouldn't let her. He said it would be better for both of us. He performed memory modifications on the workers at the orphanage. He made them believe I had been delivered by the state after the deaths of my parents. I was given a bed and a set of clothes, and then my father left. I never saw my parents again."

Dennis Deedle's eyes didn't leave his son's face when Merlin spoke. "You were very hard done by, Mr. Deedle. I assume Deedle is not your given name, is it?"

"No. My father invented that name for me," Dennis said blandly. "I hate it."

"What is your given name, sir?"

"Dolohov," Ralph's father answered, his voice growing distant, almost dead. "My name is Denniston Gilles Dolohov. Son of Maximillion and Whilhelmina Dolovov. Younger step-brother of Antonin."

There was a moment of very cold silence, and then McGonagall spoke. "Mr. Dolohov, do you realize that what you've done could send you to Azkaban?"

Dennis blinked, as if coming out of a trance. "What? No, no, of course not. I was promised that nothing I did was against the law."

Sacrahina coughed lightly. "Perhaps, Mr. Deedle, you'd prefer to refrain from answering any more questions until your legal representation can be present."

"Why?" Dennis said, glancing at her in alarm. "Am I in trouble? You said-"

"It would be for your best interests, sir," Sacrahina interrupted.

"You said I was doing the world a favor!" Dennis exclaimed, getting to his feet. He glanced at Harry. "She promised me that I'd be taken care of even if Prescott and his people didn't come through with the money! She said this was more important than money, anyway! When I came to them-"

“Sit *down*, Mr. Deedle!” Sacarhina said, her voice icy.

“Don’t call me that! I hate that name!” Dennis backed away from her, glancing back at Harry. “They told me it was all right to talk to Prescott! I told them what I was thinking of doing. I knew I had to check with the Ministry. They said the contract I’d signed wasn’t binding because I wasn’t a Muggle. And I left the wizarding world before I was old enough to sign the wizarding vow of secrecy, too, so I wasn’t breaking any laws. She promised me it was all right! She said it was for everybody’s good and that I’d be a hero!”

“Miss Sacharina,” Harry said, producing his wand but not quite brandishing it. “What do you have to say in response to this man’s accusations?”

“I have nothing to say whatsoever,” she replied easily. “He is clearly deranged. No one would believe the word of such a person.”

“Mr. Recreant?” Harry said, turning to the stunned man. “Do you concur with Miss Sacarhina’s assessment?”

Recreant’s eyes moved like flies, flicking back and forth between Sacarhina and Harry. “I’d...” he began, and then lowered both his eyes and his voice. “I’d like the chance to discuss this outside of Miss Sacarhina’s hearing.”

“Mr. Recreant, as your superior, I forbid-”

“You’ll forbid nothing, Madam,” Neville said sternly, slipping his own wand from his robes.

“In the name of ambassadorial security, I have to insist...” Sacarhina began, but stopped as Harry pointed his wand at her.

“In the name of the *Ministry of Magic* and the Department of Aurors,” he said, “I place you, Miss Brenda Sacarhina, under arrest for attempted violation of section two of the international law of secrecy and for the theft of Ministry of Magic property.”

Sacarhina tried to smile, but it was a relatively poor attempt. “You can’t prove anything, Mr. Potter. This is a foolish and dangerous game you are playing. I will only warn you once to stand down.”

“You should think twice before conspiring with people who despise you, Miss Sacarhina,” Merlin said, smiling ruefully. “I had a charming and illuminating conversation with Madame Delacroix when I discovered her in the forest. She has much to say about you, I’m afraid, and very little of it is what I’d be prepared to call flattering.”

Neville was leading Mr. Recreant out of the room, with the headmistress following. Harry gestured with his wand. “Come, Miss Sacarhina. Titus Hardcastle awaits to escort you back to the Ministry, and patience is not one of his stronger suits.”

Sacrhina's face went blank as she realized she had no choice but to follow along. No doubt she had a very good defense ready, James thought as she stalked out of the room in front of his dad. People like her always had lots of ways to cover their tracks. Still, it didn't look good for Brenda Sacrhina. As the door leading to the Great Hall swung open, James saw Titus Hardcastle grinning mirthlessly, his wand pointing carefully at the floor.

James found himself left only with Merlin, Zane, Ralph and Dennis Dolohov

Dennis looked at his son, and then touched him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Ralph. I really am. I was... confused."

"You should've told me, Dad," Ralph said, dropping his eyes.

Dennis nodded. After a moment, he raised his eyes to Merlin. "Am I going to go to wizarding prison?" he asked, trying to firm his voice. "I'll... I'll go along quietly, I guess."

"Somehow, I suspect not, Mr. Dolohov," Merlin said, turning to lead the group out of the chamber. He opened the door leading to the Great Hall. "But your actions have resulted in quite a conundrum. It appears that this school's security, strong as it may once have been, is not quite prepared to meet the challenges of modern Muggle technology. Perhaps you'd have some thoughts on how to improve it?"

Dennis frowned. "What are you suggesting? You want my *help*?"

Merlin shrugged. "I am simply acknowledging a rather curious coincidence. You are in need of employment, and we are in need of a revised security programme. As a wizard who also happens to be an expert in Muggle technology, you seem rather uniquely qualified to serve in that regard."

Dennis grinned in relief. "I'll think about that, sir."

"I am in no position to make any offers on behalf of this school, of course," Merlin said, crossing the Great Hall with his long, commanding stride. "But I know the headmistress. I'll see what I can do."

"So," Zane said, following Ralph and James into the Entrance Hall. "Turns out you were of solid magical stock after all, Ralph, even if they were a bunch of cruel, heartless purebloods. Not that it matters, really, but it does sort of explain why you were made a Slytherin."

"Maybe," Ralph said quietly. "This is all too much for me to take in one day. Either way, none of that magic was mine. It was the staff."

Merlin stopped near the stairs, and then turned slowly. He gazed at Ralph speculatively. "You were the keeper of my staff?"

"Yeah," Ralph answered dejectedly. "I kept it from killing anyone, I guess. But barely."



“Don’t listen to him,” Zane said. “He was spectacular with it. Saved James’ life once with it. Grew a peach tree out of a banana, too! So he once burned a bald stripe onto Victoire’s head in D.A.D.A. All of us have thought about doing that to her from time to time just to shut her up.”

Merlin approached Ralph. James was certain the wizard hadn’t been carrying his staff a moment before, but as he lowered himself to one knee in front of Ralph, he now held it in his right hand. The runes along its length were dark, but James remembered how they’d pulsed with green light the night before.

“Mr. Deedle- or shall I call you Mr. Dolohov?” Merlin said.

“I’m kind of attached to the Deedle,” Ralph answered, glancing up at his father. “I don’t know if I’m ready to be a Dolohov yet. Sorry, Dad.” Dennis gave a small understanding smile.

“Mr. Deedle, then,” Merlin said. “Not just any wizard could have born the responsibility of the staff. You have heard it said that the wand chooses the wizard, and this is true. Madame Delacroix believed you were merely a vessel to bring the staff to her, but she was mistaken. The staff chose you. A lesser wizard would have been unable even to hold the staff, much less use it. But you, without knowing it, brought the staff under your own power. You had no idea of the strength of it, and yet you managed it. It obeyed you, and that is the mark of a wizard of very, very great potential. Part of this staff now belongs to you, Mr. Deedle. I have felt it. I knew that a portion of it was no longer my own, but I knew not whose it was. Now I know.”

Merlin lowered his staff so that it lay across his knee. He closed his eyes and felt along the length of the staff, his hand barely touching the wood. Faint green light moved within the runes, flickering. Merlin wrapped his hand around the lower, tapered end of his staff, then, with barely a twist, broke off the last foot of its length. He opened his eyes again and held the length of wood out to Ralph.

“You are, I believe, in need of a wand, Mr. Deedle.”

Ralph took the length of wood from Merlin. As he did, the wood became his wand again, still ridiculously fat and chunky, with the lime green painted tip. Ralph grinned, turning it over in his hands.

“I wouldn’t expect it to be quite as powerful as it once was, of course,” Merlin said, turning his staff upright and using it to stand again. The staff was noticeably shorter now. “But I suspect you will still be able to do remarkable things with it.”

“Thanks,” Ralph said seriously.

“Don’t thank me,” Merlin said, raising an eyebrow. “It’s yours, Mr. Deedle. You made it so.”

“So the wizard gives the cowardly lion his courage,” Zane said, grinning. “When does James here get some brains?”

Merlin cinched his eyebrow a bit higher, looking from Zane to James.

“Don’t pay him any attention,” James said, laughing and leading the group to the stairs. “It’s a Muggle thing. We wouldn’t understand.”

“Come on!” Ralph called, running up the steps. “I want to show Ted and the rest of the Gremlins I’ve got my wand back! Tabitha Corsica can *keep* her stupid broom.”

The three boys scrambled up the moving staircases, followed more sedately by Merlin and the newly reborn Dennis Dolohov.

“Will he be okay with that thing?” Dennis asked Merlin, frowning a little.

Merlin merely smiled and clacked his staff on the steps as he climbed. Unnoticed, a jet of lime green sparks shot from the tip, swirling and glowing like fireflies in their wake.