



9. THE DEBATE BETRAYAL

As James became more familiar with the routine of school, time seemed to slip past almost without his noticing. Zane continued to excel at Quidditch, and James continued to feel an uncomfortable mix of emotions about Zane's success. He still felt the stab of jealousy when he heard the crowd cheer for one of Zane's well-hit bludgers, but he couldn't help smiling at how much the boy loved the sport, how he delighted in each match, in the teamwork and camaraderie. Also, James was growing increasingly confident of his own broom skills. He practiced with Zane on the Quidditch pitch many evenings, asking Zane for tips on technique. Zane, for his part, was always enthusiastic and supportive, telling James that he'd definitely make the Gryffindor team next year.

"Then I'll have to stop practicing with you and giving you pointers, you know." Zane said, flying next to James and calling over the roar of the air. "It'd be like consorting with the enemy." As usual, James couldn't tell if Zane was joking or not.

James enjoyed becoming more confident on the broom, but he was surprised to discover that he loved football. Tina Curry had divided all of her classes into teams and arranged a casual game schedule for them to play against one another. Many students had grasped the essential concepts of the game and, being competitive at heart, had worked to make the class-time matches interesting. Occasionally, a student would forget the non-magical nature of the sport and would be seen frantically searching their pockets for their wands, or simply pointing at the ball and yelling something like “accio football!” resulting in a general breakdown of the match while everyone laughed. Once, a Hufflepuff girl had simply grabbed the ball in both hands, forgetting the basic rules of the game, and charged down the field as if she were playing rugby. James discovered, rather reluctantly, that Professor Curry’s assessment of his skills had been fairly accurate. He was a natural. He could control the ball easily with the tips of his trainers as he zigged and zagged down the field. His ball-handling was regarded as among the best of any of the new players, and his scoring rate was second only to seventh-year Sabrina Hildegard, who, like Zane, was Muggle-born and, unlike Zane, had played on Muggle leagues when she was younger.

James and Ralph, however, barely talked. James’ initial anger and resentment had simmered down to a stubborn aloofness. Some small part of him knew that he should forgive Ralph, and even apologize for yelling at him that day in the Great Hall. He knew that if he’d kept his cool, Ralph probably would have seen the error of siding with his Slytherin Housemates. Instead, Ralph seemed to feel it was his duty to support the Slytherins and the Progressive Element as earnestly as he could. If it wasn’t for the fact that even Ralph’s enthusiastic support was rather weak-willed and doleful, James would have found it easier to stay angry at him. Ralph wore the blue badgess, and he attended the debate meetings in the library, but he did so with such a dogged attitude of obligation that it seemed to do more harm than good. If any of the Slytherins actually spoke to him, he’d jerk upright and respond with manic eagerness, then deflate as soon as they turned their attention elsewhere. It hurt James a little to watch it, but not enough to make him change his attitude toward Ralph.

In his room at night, or in a corner of the library, James would study the poem he and Zane had seen on the gate to the Grotto Keep. With Zane’s help, he had written it down from memory and was confident it was accurate. Still, he couldn’t seem to make much of it. All he knew for sure was that the first two lines referred to the fact that the Grotto Keep could only be found by moonlight. The rest was a puzzle. He kept fetching up on the line that read “Did wake his languid sleep”, wondering if that could refer to Merlin. But Merlin wasn’t asleep, was he?

“Makes it sound like he’s Rip Van Winkle,” Zane whispered one day in the library. “Snoozing away a few hundred years out under a tree somewhere.” Zane had had to explain the fairy tale of Rip Van Winkle, and James considered it. He knew from hearing his dad’s conversations with other aurors that much of Muggle mythology came from long-distant encounters with witches and wizards. Stories of wizarding lore made their way into Muggle fairy tales, became stylized or altered, and grew into legends and myth. Perhaps, James mused, this story of the long sleeper, who awoke hundreds of years later, was a Muggle echo of the story of Merlin. Still, it didn’t get James or Zane any closer to figuring out how Merlin could possibly return after so many centuries, nor did it offer any clues as to who might be involved in such a conspiracy.

At night, as he was drifting to sleep, James often found his thoughts returning, strangely enough, to his conversation with the portrait of Severus Snape. Snape had said he'd be watching James, but James couldn't imagine how that could be. There was only one portrait of Snape on the Hogwarts grounds, as far as James knew, and it was up in the headmistress' office. How could Snape possibly be watching James? Snape had been a powerful wizard, and a potions genius according to dad and mum, but how would either of those things allow his portrait to see around the castle? Still, James didn't doubt Snape. If Snape said he was watching him, James felt confident that, somehow or other, it was true. It was only after two weeks of mulling over the conversation he'd had with Snape that James realized what struck him most about it. To Snape, unlike James and the rest of the wizarding world, it was a foregone conclusion that James was just like his father. *Like Potter like son*, he'd said, sneering. Ironically, though, to Snape, if no one else, this was not precisely a good thing.

As the leaves in the Forbidden Forest began to settle into the browns and yellows of autumn, the blue Progressive Element buttons were augmented by the posters and banners for the first All-School Debate. As Ralph had predicted, the theme was "Re-evaluating the Assumptions of the Past; Truth or Conspiracy". As if the words themselves weren't enough, the right side of each banner and poster bore a drawing of a lightning bolt that was enchanted to shift into the shape of a question mark every few seconds. Zane, who, according to Petra, was quite good at debate, told James that the school debate committee had argued for quite some time about the topic of the first event. Tabitha Corsica was not on the debate committee, but her crony, Philia Goyle, was the committee chair.

"So in the end," Zane had reported to James, "the debate team turned out to be a great example of democracy in action: *they* argued all night, then *she* chose." He shrugged wearily.

The sight of the signs and banners, and especially that very unambiguous lightning bolt, made James's blood boil. Seeing Ralph on a ladder finishing hanging one of the banners just outside the door to Technomancy class was more than he could take.

"I'm surprised you can reach like that, Ralph," James said, anger pushing the words out, "what with Tabitha Corsica's hand so far up your backside."

Zane, who'd been walking next to James, sighed and ducked into the classroom. Ralph hadn't noticed James until he spoke. He glanced down, his expression surprised and wounded. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"It means, I'd think by now you'd have gotten sick of being her little first-year puppet." James already regretted saying anything. The guileless misery on Ralph's face shamed him.

Ralph had the mantra down well, though. "*You're* people are the puppetmasters, preying on the fears of the weak-minded to maintain the demagoguery of prejudice and unfairness." he said, but without much conviction. James rolled his eyes and walked into the classroom.

Professor Jackson was absent from his usual spot behind the teacher's desk. James sat next to Zane in the front row. As he sat down, he made a point of joking and laughing with a few other Gryffindors nearby, knowing Ralph was watching through the doorway. The mean pleasure it gave him was hollow and raw, but it was pleasure nonetheless.

Finally the room hushed. James looked up and saw Professor Jackson entering, carrying something under his arm. The object was large, flat and wrapped in cloth.

"Good morning, class," he said in his usual, brusque manner. "Your last week's essays are graded and on my desk. Mr. Murdock, would you mind distributing them, please. On the whole, I am not terribly disappointed, although I think most of you can be relieved that Hogwarts does not generally grade on the curve."

Jackson carefully set his parcel on the desk. As he unfolded the cloth from around it, James could see that it was a stack of three rather small paintings. He thought of the painting of Severus Snape and his attention perked up.

"Today is a day for taking notes, I can assure you," Jackson said ominously. He arranged the paintings in a row along the shelf of the chalkboard. The first painting was of a thin man with owlsh glasses and an almost perfectly bald head. He blinked at the class, his expression alert and slightly nervous, as if he expected someone, at any moment, to jump up and shout "boo!" at him. The next painting was empty but for a rather bland wooded background. The last showed a fairly ghastly clown in white face with a hideously large, red smile painted over its mouth. The clown leered inanely at the class and shook a little cane with a ball on the end. The ball, James noticed with a shudder, was a tiny version of the clown's own head, grinning even more insantly.

Murdock finished handing back everyone's papers and slid back into his own seat. James glanced down at his essay. On the front, in Jackson's perfect, left-slanting cursive, were the words: *Tepid, but borderline cogent. Grammar needs work.*

"As always, questions about your grades may be submitted to me in writing. Further discussion will be obtained, as needed, during my office hours, assuming any of you remember where my office is. And now, onward and upward." Jackson paced slowly along the line of paintings, gesturing vaguely at them. "As many of you will recall, in our first class, we had a short discussion, spear-headed by Mr. Walker," he peered beneath his bushy eyebrows in Zane's direction, "about the nature of magical art. I explained that the artist's intentions are imbued on the canvas via a magical, psycho-kinetic process, which allows the art to take on a semblance of motion and attitude. The result is a drawing that moves and mimics life at the whim of the artist. Today, we will examine a different kind of art, one that represents life in a wholly different way."

Quills scratched feverishly as the class struggled to keep up with Jackson's monologue. As usual, Jackson paced as he spoke.

“The art of magical painting comes in two forms. The first one is just a more lavish version of what I illustrated in class, which is the creation of purely fanciful imagery based on the imagination of the artist. This is different from Muggle art only inasmuch as the magical versions may move and emote, based on the intention- and only within the imaginative boundaries- of the artist. Our friend Mr. Biggles, here, is an example.” Jackson gestured at the painting of the clown. “Mr. Biggles, thankfully, never existed outside the imagination of the artist who painted him.” The clown responded to the attention, bobbing in its frame, wagging the fingers of one white-gloved hand and waving the cane in the other. The tiny clown’s head on the end of the cane ran its tongue out and crossed its eyes. Jackson glared at the thing for a moment, and then sighed as he began to pace again.

“The second type of magical painting is much more precise. It depends on advanced spellwork and potion-mixed paints to recreate a living individual or creature. The technomantic name for this type of painting is *imago aetasperculum*, which means... can anyone tell me?”

Petra raised her hand and Jackson nodded at her. “It means, I think, something like a living mirror image, sir?”

Jackson considered her answer. “Half credit, Miss Morganstern. Five points to Gryffindor for effort. The most accurate definition of the term is a magical painting that captures a living imprint of the individual it represents, but confined within the *aetas*, or timeframe, of the subject’s own lifetime. The result is a portrait that, while not containing the living essence of the subject, mirrors every intellectual and emotional characteristic of that subject. Thus, the portrait does not learn and evolve beyond the subject’s death, but retains exactly that subject’s personality as strictly defined by his or her lifetime. We have Mr. Cornelius Yarrow here as an example.”

Jackson now indicated the thin, rather nervous man in the portrait. Yarrow flinched slightly at Jackson’s gesture. Mr. Biggles capered frantically in his frame, jealous for attention.

“Mr. Yarrow, when did you die?” Jackson asked, passing the portrait on his way around the room again.

The portrait’s voice was as thin as the man in it, with a high, nasal tone. “September twentieth, nineteen forty-nine. I was sixty-seven years and three months old, rounding up, of course.”

“And what- as if I needed to ask- was your occupation?”

“I was Hogwarts school bursar for thirty-two years.” the portrait answered with a sniff.

Jackson turned to look at the painting. “And what do you do now?”

The portrait blinked nervously, “Excuse me?”

“With all the time you now have on your hands, I mean. It’s been a long time since nineteen forty-nine. What do you do with yourself, Mr. Yarrow? Have you developed any hobbies?”

Yarrow seemed to chew his lips, obviously mystified and worried by the question. “I... hobbies? No hobbies, as such. I... I always just liked numbers. I tend to think about my work. That’s what I always did when I wasn’t figuring the books. I thought about the budgets, the numbers, and worked them out in my head.”

Jackson maintained eye contact with the painting. “You still think about the numbers? You spend your time working out the books for the school budget as it stood in nineteen forty-nine?”

Yarrow’s eyes darted back and forth over the class. He seemed to feel he was being trapped somehow. “Er. Yes. Yes, I do. It’s just what I do, you understand. What I always did. I see no reason to stop. I’m the bursar, you see. Well, *was*, of course. The bursar.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Yarrow. You’ve illustrated my point precisely,” said Jackson, resuming his circuit of the room.

“Always happy to be of service.” Yarrow said a little stiffly.

Jackson addressed the class again. “Mr. Yarrow’s portrait, as some of you probably know, normally hangs in the corridor just outside the headmistress’s office, along with many other former school staff members and faculty. We have, however, come into possession of a second portrait of Mr. Yarrow, one that normally hangs in his family’s home. The second portrait, as you may guess, is here in the center of our display. Mr. Yarrow, if you please?” Jackson gestured at the empty portrait in the center.

Yarrow raised his eyebrows. “Hm? Oh. Yes, of course.” He shifted, stood, brushed some nonexistent flecks of lint off his natty robes, and then stepped carefully out of the portrait frame. For a few seconds, both portraits stood empty, then Yarrow appeared in the center portrait. He was wearing slightly different clothes in this portrait, and when he sat, he was turned at an angle, showing the prow of his nose in profile.

“Thank you again, Mr. Yarrow,” Jackson said, leaning against his desk and crossing his arms. “Although there are exceptions, typically, a portrait only becomes active upon the death of the subject. Technomancy cannot explain to us why this should be, except that it seems to respond to the law of Conservation of Personalities. In other words, one Mr. Cornelius Yarrow at any given moment is, cosmically speaking, sufficient.” There was a murmur of suppressed laughter. Yarrow frowned as Jackson continued, “Another factor that comes into play once the subject is deceased is the interactivity between portraits. If there are more than one portrait of an individual, the portraits become connected, sharing a common subject. The result is one *mutual* portrait that can maneuver at will between its frames. For instance, Mr. Yarrow can visit us at Hogwarts, and then return to his home portrait as he wishes.”

James struggled to write all of Jackson’s comments down, knowing the professor was notorious for creating test questions out of the least detail of a lecture. He was distracted from the task, however, by thoughts of the portrait of Severus Snape. James risked raising his hand.

Jackson spied him and his eyebrows rose slightly. “A question, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, sir. Can a portrait ever leave its own frames? Can it, maybe, go over into a different painting?”

Jackson studied James for a moment, his eyebrows still raised. “Excellent question, Mr. Potter. Let us find out, shall we? Mr. Yarrow, may I beg your service once more?”

Yarrow was trying to maintain the pose of his second portrait, which was studious and thoughtful, looking slightly away. His eyes slid to the side, looking out at Jackson. “I suppose so. How else may I help?”

“Are you aware of the painting of the rather odious Mr. Biggles in the frame next to you?”

Mr. Biggles responded to the mention of his name by feigning great shock and shyness. He covered his mouth with one hand and batted his eyes. The tiny clown’s head on the end of the cane goggled and blew raspberries. Yarrow sighed. “I am aware of that painting, yes.”

“Would you be so kind as to step into his painting for just a moment, sir?”

Yarrow turned to Jackson, his watery eyes magnified behind his spectacles. “Even if that were possible, I don’t believe I could bring myself to join his company. I’m sorry.”

Jackson nodded, closing his eyes respectfully. “Thank you, yes, I don’t blame you, Mr. Yarrow. No, we can see, therefore, that while a much stronger magic is required to create the *imago aetaspiculum*, it isn’t designed to allow the portrait to enter a painting of a purely imaginary subject. It would be, in a sense, like trying to force yourself through a drawing of a door. On the other hand, Mr. Biggles?” The clown jumped up ecstatically at the mention of its name again, then looked at Jackson with a caricature of intense attention. Jackson spread an arm toward the middle frame. “Please join Mr. Yarrow in his portrait, won’t you?”

Cornelius Yarrow looked shocked, then horrified, as the clown leaped out of its own painting and into his. Mr. Biggles landed behind Yarrow’s chair, grabbing it and nearly rocking Yarrow out of it. Yarrow spluttered as Biggles leered forward, his head over Yarrow’s left shoulder, the miniature clown’s head cane over his right, blowing raspberries into the man’s ear.

“Professor Jackson!” Yarrow exclaimed, his voice rising an octave and trembling on the verge of inaudibility. “I insist you remove this... this fevered imagining from my portrait at once!”

The class erupted into gales of laughter as the clown leaped over Yarrow’s shoulder and landed on his lap, throwing both arms around the man’s skinny neck. The clown’s head cane kissed Yarrow repeatedly on the nose. “Mr. Biggles,” Jackson said loudly. “That’s enough. Please return to your own painting.”

The clown seemed disinclined to obey. He threw himself off Yarrow’s lap and hid elaborately behind the man’s chair. Biggles’s eyes peeped over Yarrow’s right shoulder, the miniature head peeped over his left. Yarrow turned and swatted at the clown prissily, as if it were a spider he was loathe to touch but anxious to kill. Jackson produced his wand- a twelve-inch length of hickory- from his sleeve and pointed it carefully at

the clown's empty frame. "Shall I alter your environment while you are away, Mr. Biggles? You'll need to return to it eventually. Would you prefer to find it stocked with a few more Japanese Thorn Thickets?"

The clown frowned petulantly under its make-up and stood. Sulking, it clambered out of Yarrow's portrait and back into its own frame.

"A simple rule of thumb," Jackson said, watching the clown give him a very enthusiastic nasty look. "A one-dimensional personality can merge into a two-dimensional personality's environment, but not the other way around. Portraits are confined to their own frames, while imaginary subjects can move freely into and through any other painting in their general vicinity. Does that answer your question, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, sir." James answered, then rushed on, "One more thing, though. Can a portrait ever appear in more than one of its frames at once?"

Jackson smiled at James while simultaneously furrowing his brow. "Your inquisitiveness on the subject knows no bounds, it seems, Mr. Potter. As a matter of fact that is possible, although it is a rarity. For great wizards, whose portraits have been duplicated many times, there has been known to be some division of the personality, allowing the subject to appear in multiple frames at once. Such is the case with your Albus Dumbledore, as you might guess. This phenomenon is very difficult to measure and, of course, depends entirely on the skill of the witch or wizard whose likeness appears in the portrait. Is that all, Mr. Potter?"

"Professor Jackson, sir?" a different voice asked. James turned to see Philia Goyle near the back, her hand raised.

"Yes, Miss Goyle." Jackson said, sighing.

"If I understand correctly, the portrait knows everything that the subject knew, yes?"

"I believe that is apparent, Miss Goyle. The painting reflects the personality, knowledge and experiences of the subject. No more and no less."

"Does a portrait, then, make its subject immortal?" Philia asked. Her face, as always, was stoic and impassive.

"I am afraid you are confusing what *appears* to be with what is, Miss Goyle," Jackson said, eyeing Philia closely, "and that is a dreadful mistake for a witch to make. Much of magic, and much of life in general I might add, is concerned primarily with illusion. The ability to separate illusion from reality is one of the fundamental basics of Technomancy. No, a portrait is merely a representation of the once-living subject, no more alive than your own shadow where it falls on the ground. It can in no way be thought to prolong the life of the deceased subject. Despite all appearances, a wizard portrait is still merely paint on canvas."

As Jackson finished speaking, he turned toward the painting of Mr. Biggles. With one swift movement, he pointed his wand at the painting, not even quite looking at it. A jet of clear, yellowish liquid spurted from the end of the wand and splashed on the canvas. Instantly, it dissolved the paint. Mr. Biggles

stopped moving as his image blurred, then ran freely down the canvas. The unmistakable smell of turpentine filled the room. The class was deadly quiet.

Professor Jackson walked slowly behind his desk. “I fancied myself a bit of an artist when I was younger,” he said, studying the end of his wand as he turned. “Mr. Biggles, horrid as he was, was one of my better works. You may freely guess what kind of life circumstances could lead to my creating such a thing, as I myself have forgotten. I thought Mr. Biggles was long forgotten as well, until I found him in the bottom of a trunk while packing for my journey. I thought,” he said, glancing over at the streaky mess that ran out of the frame and dripped to the floor, “that this would be a fitting end for him.”

Jackson sat down at his desk, carefully laying his wand on the blotter in front of him. “And now, class, what Technomantic truth can we derive from what I’ve just illustrated?”

No one moved. Then a hand raised slowly.

Jackson inclined his head. “Mr. Murdock?”

Murdock cleared his throat. “Don’t try to be an artist if you’re supposed to be a Technomancy teacher, sir?”

“That wasn’t quite what I had in mind, Mr. Murdock, but that is inarguably true as well. No, the truth I was illustrating is that, while a wizard painting, portrait or otherwise, is indeed still merely paint on canvas,” Jackson’s gaze searched the class, then settled on James. “Only the original artist can destroy his painting. No one or nothing else. The canvas can be slashed, the frame destroyed, the bindings cut, but the painting will endure. It will continue to represent its subject, no matter what happens to it, even in a hundred pieces. Only the original artist can destroy that connection, and once he does, it is destroyed forever.”

As the class was dismissed, James couldn’t help slowing as he passed the destroyed painting of Mr. Biggles. The clown’s face was nothing more than a muddy gray blur in the center of the canvas. Squiggly streaks of paint ran over the bottom edge of the frame, puddled in the chalk tray, and dripped onto the floor, making a drab spatter of white and bloody red. James shuddered, and then walked on. He thought he’d never look at another wizard painting the same way again. As he made his way to his next class, he passed a painting of several wizards gathered around a gigantic globe. Ironically, James noticed that one of the wizards, a severe man with a black mustache and glasses, was watching him closely. James stopped and leaned in. The wizard’s stare became stonier, his eyes piercing.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about,” James said quietly. “I don’t even know how to draw. Art is Zane’s department.”

The painted wizard grimaced at him, annoyed, as if James had entirely missed the point. He made a harrumphing noise and pointed in the direction James had been walking, as if to say *move along, nothing to see here*.

James resumed his walk to Charms class, musing idly about the wizard in the painting. He'd looked familiar, but James couldn't quite place him. By the time he entered Professor Flitwick's classroom, James had already forgotten the little painted wizard and his piercing stare.



The day of the much ballyhooed first school debate came and James was surprised at how many people were planning to attend. He had assumed debates were typically stodgy little affairs attended only by the teams themselves, some teachers, and a handful of the more academically-minded students. By lunch that Friday, though, the debate had generated the sort of boisterous tension that accompanied certain Quidditch matches. The one thing that seemed to be missing, however, was the joking taunts between the supporters. Thanks to the carefully worded banners and signs advertising the debate, the student population had been rather evenly divided between two worldviews that, it seemed, were not compatible on any level. The result was a sullen tension that filled the silences where jests and competitive taunts might otherwise have been. James had not been seriously considering attending the debate. Now, though, he realized that the outcome of the event would very likely affect the entire culture of Hogwarts. For that reason, he felt an obligation to go, as well as a growing curiosity. Besides, if Zane was going to be arguing in front of a large portion of the school populace, partly in defense of Harry Potter, James knew it'd be important that he be there to show his support.

After dinner, James joined Ted and the rest of the Gremlins as they made their way to the event, along with much of the rest of the student populace.

The debate was held in the Amphitheater, where the occasional play and concert were usually performed. James had never been in the Amphitheater before. The open-air seating area, carved out of the hillside behind the east tower, descended in steep terraces down to a large stage. As James made his way through the crowded arch that opened onto the top tier of seating, he saw that the stage below was nearly empty. A high-backed, official-looking chair sat in the center rear of the stage, flanked by two podiums and two long tables, with chairs arranged along their backs. Professor Flitwick was on stage, guiding a phosphorous globe into the air with his wand, placing it among several others that lit the stage at strategic

locations. The orchestra pit had been covered over with a great wooden platform, and then arranged with a library table and six chairs. Zane had explained that the judges would sit there. The noise of the crowd of students was a hushed babble, nearly lost in the normal evening noises emanating from the dim hills and the nearby forest. Ted, Sabrina and Damien led the way into a row halfway up the middle section, joining a group of other Gryffindors. Noah was already there. He waved at James as they found their seats.

“Gremlin salute.” Noah said, performing, with a straight face, a complicated series of hand gestures that involved a traditional hand to the forehead salute, a raised fist, a waggle of both elbows that looked a bit like a chicken dance, and ended with both hands framing the sides of his face, pinky and thumbs extended, apparently mimicking gremlin ears.

Ted nodded, responding with only the gremlin-ear gesture, which was apparently the counter-sign. “Have our friends from triple double-you come through for us?”

Noah nodded. “We ran a small test this afternoon under controlled circumstances. Looks even better than we hoped. And,” he added, grinning, “they provided their services free of charge. George sent a note with the package asking only that we tell him exactly how it turns out.”

Ted smiled rather humorlessly. “We’ll give him a full report, either way.”

James nudged Ted. “What’s going on?”

“James, my boy,” Ted said, scanning the crowd, “do you know what the term ‘plausible deniability’ means?”

James shook his head. “No.”

“Ask your buddy, Zane. It was invented by the Americans. Let’s just say, sometimes it’s best not to know anything until after the fact.”

James shrugged, figuring he was sitting close enough to the action to know, probably before anyone else, what the Gremlins were up to. Someone nearby had a small wireless tuned to the Wizarding Wireless Network. The tiny voice on the speaker burbled away, forming part of the background noise, until James heard the phrase “crowded Amphitheater”. He swept his gaze over the groups clustered near the stage, and then saw what he was looking for. A tall man wearing a purple bowler hat was speaking into the tip of his wand. The cadence of his speech blew small smoky puffs off the end of his wand, the puffs forming the shapes of words as they floated through the air. On a small table near the man was a machine that looked somewhat like an old fashioned record player with a huge funnel. The wispy word-shapes were sucked into the funnel as fast as they flowed off the man’s wand. James had never seen a magical broadcast in action. He read the words the wizard was speaking a second before they were broadcast to the nearby wireless.

“The curious and the contentious alike seem to have gathered in droves for tonight’s contest,” the announcer said, “illustrating the ongoing debate all around the wizarding world these days, as doubts about Ministry policy and auror practices meet questions regarding recent magical history. Tonight, via this special

broadcast of Current Wizard's Newswatch, we will see what one of the country's foremost centers of magical learning thinks of this divisive issue. I'm your host, Myron Madrigal, speaking on behalf of tonight's sponsor, Wymnot's Wand polish and Enchant-Enhancer: better spells come from a Wymnot wand. We'll be right back for opening comments after this important message."

The announcer twirled a finger at an assistance, who plugged the funnel with a large plunger, then spindled a record into the device. A commercial for Wymnot Wand polish began to play on the nearby wireless. James had been concerned about the debate being broadcast to the wizarding world at large, but then decided it was better than having it parsed and reported in bits by someone like Rita Skeeter. At least this way, all the arguments would be heard in their entirety. He could only hope that Zane, Petra and their team would argue well against Tabitha Corsica and her carefully woven agenda of doubts and half-truths.

Just as the commercial on the nearby wireless ended, Benjamin Franklyn approached the left side podium on-stage. On the wireless, the announcer's voice spoke in a hushed tone, "In a daring turn of events, the chancellor of the American wizarding school, Alma Aleron, Benjamin Amadeaus Franklyn has been asked to officiate tonight's debate. He approaches the podium."

"Good evening, friends, students, guests." Franklyn said, foregoing his wand and raising his clear, tenor voice. "Welcome to this, Hogwarts' inaugural All-School Debate. My name is Benjamin Franklyn, and I am honored to have been chosen to introduce tonight's teams. Without further delay, will teams A and B take their places on the stage?"

A group of ten people stood from the front row. The group split, half ascending the stage on the right side and half on the left. They filed into the chairs behind the two tables as Franklyn introduced them. Team A consisted of Zane, Petra, Gennifer Tellus, a Hufflepuff named Andrew Haubert, and an Alma Aleron student named Gerald Jones. Team B was, not surprisingly, mostly fifth to seventh year Slytherins, including Tabitha Corsica, her crony Tom Squallus, and two others, Heather Flack and Nolan Beetlebrick. The fifth person at the table, and the only one younger than fifteen, was Ralph. He sat in his chair as rigid as a statue, staring at Franklyn as if he was hypnotized.

"Tonight's debate," Franklyn continued, adjusting his square spectacles, "as can be assumed by the turnout and the press coverage, deals with subjects both weighty and far-reaching. It has been said that dissent is the greatest expression of freedom, and that debate and discourse are the fuel for a right-thinking populace to maintain a fair government. These are the axioms that define us, and tonight, we will see them in action. Let us all assume an attitude of respect and reason, regardless of our own opinions, so that what flows tonight does so in a manner befitting this school and all who have passed through its halls. No matter the outcome," Franklyn turned at this point, acknowledging the two debate teams seated on either side, "let us leave here as we entered: friends, classmates, and fellow witches and wizards."

There was a round of applause which, James thought, sounded rather more perfunctory than appreciative. Franklyn produced a paper from his robes and examined it.

“As was determined earlier this evening by lots,” he called out in an official voice, “Team B is first to offer opening statements. Miss Tabitha Corsica, I believe, will represent. Miss Corsica.”

Franklyn backed away from the podium, taking a seat in the high-backed chair at the rear center of the stage. Tabitha approached the left podium, her hands empty. She smiled her wonderful smile at the crowd, seeming to take every person in one by one. “Friends and classmates, teachers and members of the press, may I be so bold as to begin by pointing out that the remarks of our esteemed Professor Franklyn, in fact, represent the very heart of the error that underlies our discussion tonight.”

The crowd reacted with something like a mutual gasp or sigh of anticipation. Tabitha took the moment to turn and smile at Benjamin Franklyn. “With apologies and respect, Professor.” Franklyn seemed entirely unperturbed. He raised a hand to her, palm up, and nodded. *Do tell*, the gesture seemed to say.

“Of course, decorum and respect must rule the day during a discourse like this,” Tabitha said, returning her attention to the audience. “In that respect we couldn’t agree more with the professor. No, the error lies in Professor Franklyn’s last sentence. He encourages us, most of all, to remember that we are all, in the end, fellow witches and wizards. Friends, is this the essential basis of our identity? If so, then I contend that we are the worst of tyrants, the lowest form of bigot. For are we not, beneath the wands and the spells, more human than witch or wizard? To allow ourselves to be primarily defined by our magic is to deny the humanity we share in common with the non-magical world. Worse, it relegates, by omission, the rest of humanity to a status both lower and less important than our own. Now, I do not ascribe these prejudices to Professor Franklyn in particular. These prejudices are as ingrained into the methods and manners of current wizarding policy as magic is ingrained into a broomstick. It is not the innate belief of the magical world that Muggle humanity is inferior to our own, but it is the unfortunate and inevitable result of current Ministry policies.

“Our argument tonight is that the assumptions of the current ruling class have led to this prejudice. Those assumptions are three-fold. The first is that the Law of Secrecy is a necessary safeguard against a Muggle world supposedly incapable of dealing with our existence. While possibly necessary in a past age, we maintain that the Law of Secrecy is now obsolete, resulting only in a segregated society that unfairly denies both the wizarding and the Muggle worlds the benefits of each other.

“The second assumption is that history proves the idea that magical-Muggle congress can only result in war. We will argue that this claim has been vastly orchestrated out of a series of isolated and unconnected historical incidents that, on their own, were unfortunate but relatively unimportant. The spectre of the all-powerful evil wizard seeking world rule has been placed alongside the prejudice of the weak-minded Muggle world, incapable of accepting the existence of magical society. Both of these threats, we assert, have been cultivated by the magical ruling class to maintain a culture of fear, thus cementing their own agenda of power and control.

“And the final assumption we wish to question is the existence of so-called ‘dark’ magic. We will argue that ‘dark’ magic is simply a form of complex, if occasionally dangerous magic, only considered evil

because it was mostly used by those who at one time opposed the current magical ruling class. ‘Dark’ magic is, in short, an invention of the Department of Aurors, used to justify the squashing of any individual or group that the ruling class feels threatened by.

“We assert that these three assumptions form the basis of the policies of prejudice against the Muggle world. Our goal is equality, and nothing less, for Muggles as well as ourselves. After all, before we are witch or wizard, Muggle or magical, we are first and foremost... human.”

With that, Tabitha turned and walked back to her seat at the team B table. There was a moment of rather awed silence, then, to James dismay, the crowd erupted in applause. James looked around. Not everyone was applauding, but those that were, roughly half, did so with a grim vigor.

“...outpouring of support from the assembled students,” the voice on the wireless could just be heard to say, “as Miss Corsica, the picture of composure and assurance, takes her seat. Miss Petra Morganstern, captain of team A, now approaches the lectern...”

Petra arranged a small stack of notecards on the podium as the cheers died away. She looked up, unsmiling.

“Ladies and gentlemen, fellow classmates, greetings,” she said, her voice crisp and ringing. “The members of team B claim that there are three points to their argument, their ‘three assumptions’. Team A will argue that there is, in actuality, only one ‘assumption’ that is valid for debate tonight, their other two arguments being completely dependent upon it. That ‘assumption’ is the notion that history, as a science and as a study, is not reliable. Team B must convince us that history, rather than being trustworthy, is a complete fabrication, woven by the whims and deliberate manipulations of a small group of incredibly powerful ruling witches and wizards. These ruling individuals must be powerful indeed, because the history they have allegedly invented is, in fact, still in the memory of many of those still living today. Our parents and grandparents, our teachers, and yes, our leaders. They were there when this supposedly fabricated history took place, much of it right here on these very grounds. Using the logic of team B, the Battle of Hogwarts either never occurred, or occurred so differently as to be completely meaningless. If this is so, then we may well argue their other ‘assumptions’, such as the assertion that there is no necessity for the Law of Secrecy and that dark magic is an invention of the Department of Aurors. If, however, the historical record of the rise of the Dark Lord and his bloody quest for power and dominion over the Muggle world can be shown to be accurate, the rest of team B’s claims fall as well. Thus, we will spend our energies on that argument only, with apologies to team B.”

There was another moment of charged silence, precipitated by the mention of the Dark Lord, then another burst of applause, equal in volume to the previous, but scattered with exuberant whoops and whistles.

“A short but pithy opening statement by Miss Morganstern,” the announcers’s voice said. James saw the man in the purple bowler and read his words as they flowed from his wand to the broadcasting funnel. “Apparently crafted on the spot as a response to Miss Corsica’s three-fold outline. This promises to be a direct and spirited dialogue, ladies and gentlemen.”

For the next forty minutes, members of each team took to the podiums, offering argument and counter-argument, all timed and officiated by Professor Franklyn. The audience had been instructed to refrain from applause, but this had proven impossible to prevent. Once one round of applause had been sounded for a team's argument, it seemed incumbent upon supporters of the opposing viewpoint to cheer their own side as well. Night descended on the Amphitheater, ominously dark, with only a thin sickle moon low on the horizon. Enchanted lanterns floated over the stairs and archways, leaving the seating areas in shadow. The stage glowed in the center, lit like noonday in the glow of Professor Flitwick's gently floating phosphorous globes. Zane faced off against Heather Flack, debating the assertion that recorded histories were always manufactured by the victors.

"I'm from the United States, you know." Zane said, addressing Heather Flack across the stage. "If your statement is true, it's a remarkable thing that I've ever learned anything about my country's occasionally terrible past, from our treatment of Native Americans, to the Salem witch-hunts, to the one-time institution of slavery. If the victors fabricate our histories, how is it that I know that even Thomas Jefferson once owned slaves?"

Benjamin Franklyn winced at that, then nodded slowly, approvingly. The supporters of team A applauded uproariously.

Finally, with no clear outcome, the captains of both teams approached the podiums for final arguments. Tabitha Corsica still had first option.

"I appreciate," she began, glancing at Petra, "that my opponent in this debate has made it a point to restrict discussion to this one central tenet: that the recent history of the wizarding world has been enhanced and stylized to instill terror of some fabled, monstrous enemy. To be specific, they have continuously raised the image of The Dark Lord, as they prefer to call him. If Miss Morganstern wishes to evade the other valid facets of tonight's discussion, I will concur. If, that is, she is willing to debate the details of the one figure around whom all the other details revolve. Let us discuss the treatment of Lord Tom Riddle."

A distinct gasp of surprise and awe washed over the crowd at the mention of Voldemort's name. Even for Tabitha Corsica, James thought, bringing up Tom Riddle seemed like a terrible risk, even if he was, in fact, the heart of the issue. James sat forward in his seat, his heart pounding.

"The Dark Lord', as the Department of Aurors likes to call Tom Riddle," Tabitha said into the hushed darkness, "was indeed a powerful wizard, and perhaps even a misguided one. Overzealous, he may have been. But what, really, do we know for sure about his plans and his methods? Miss Morganstern will simply tell you he was evil. He was a 'dark' wizard, she will say, intent only on power and death. But really, do such people even exist? In comic books, perhaps. And in the minds of those who breed fear. But is anyone, in reality, utterly and irredeemably evil? No, I suggest that perhaps Tom Riddle was a misguided, but well-meaning wizard whose desire for Muggle-wizard equality was simply too radical a notion for the magical ruling class to allow. The powers-that-be put together a very careful campaign of half-truths and outright lies, all designed to discredit Riddle's ideas and demonize his followers, whom the ministry-controlled media

dubbed 'Death Eaters'. Despite this, Riddle's reformers were eventually able to win enough confidence to assume control of the Ministry of Magic for a short time. Only after a vicious and bloody coup were the old powers able to defeat Riddle and his reformers, killing Tom Riddle in the process and defaming what he stood for as mercilessly as they could."

As Tabitha spoke, a grumbling spread around the assembled crowd. The grumbling grew into isolated shouts of outrage, then calls of "let her speak!" Finally, just as she finished, the crowd erupted into an agitated frenzy that James found frightening. He glanced around. Many students had stood and were shouting through cupped hands. Several had climbed onto their seats, stomping or shaking fists. James couldn't tell who, among the crowd, was shouting for or against Tabitha.

At the height of the disturbance, James had a vague sense of Ted Lupin and Noah Metzker huddling around something. Suddenly, there was a burst of blinding light between them, throwing them into stark silhouette. The light shot upwards, filling the amphitheater with its glow. At about a hundred feet, the ball of light exploded into a million tiny lights. The crowd hushed, bewildered, every eye tilted up. The tiny lights swam together, forming shapes. There was a collective gasp as the lights formed the huge shape of the legendary Dark Mark: a skull with a snake squirming out of the mouth. Then, almost instantly, the shape was overwhelmed by a stylized lightning bolt shape. The lightning bolt seemed to strike the skull, which bit the snake in half. The front half of the snake rolled over dead, its eyes turning to little crosses, and then the skull broke in half. The lightning bolt vanished as a sign popped up out of the broken skull:

You'll laugh your skull off

at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes!

Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade Locations!

Custom Orders our Specialty!

There was a long, silent moment of complete bewilderment as everyone stared up at the glittering letters. Then the letters broke apart and fell, showering prettily into the Amphitheater. There was a titter of laughter somewhere.

"Well," Professor Franklyn said, having stood and moved center-stage. "That was, I must admit, a well-timed, if somewhat puzzling diversion." There was some scattered, embarrassed laughter. Slowly, people began to resume their seats. James turned toward Ted and Noah, who were squinting and looking dazed, blinded by the Weasley Brothers' special-order fireworks.

"Bloody Weasleys made a public service announcement out of it." Ted muttered.

Noah shrugged. "Guess that's why it was free of charge."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Franklyn continued. "This is indeed a subject of much passion for many of us, but we must not allow ourselves to become carried away. Miss Corsica has made some assertions that are,

to many of us, very difficult to hear. However, this is a debate, and where I come from, we do not,” he said with great emphasis, “squash debate simply because an argument makes us uncomfortable. I hope we can complete this discussion with dignity, otherwise, I am sure the Headmistress will agree with me that postponing final arguments will be the only recourse. Miss Morganstern, I believe you had the floor.”

Franklyn sat back down, and James sensed that he was far angrier than he was letting on. Petra stood behind her podium for several seconds, eyes down. Finally, she looked up, obviously shaken.

“I admit I don’t know quite where to begin in responding to Miss Corsica’s frankly incredible hypothesis. The Dark Lord was not merely evil because it was convenient for those in power to call him so. He used unspeakable methods to gain and maintain power. He was known for freely using, and for instructing his followers to use, all three unforgiveable curses. Lord Voldemort was no more interested in Muggle equality than... than,” she stopped, fumbling. James pressed his lips together furiously. He felt for her. There were so many lies to address. Any that slipped past would be touted as truths she was reluctant to admit.

“Miss Morganstern,” Tabitha said, her voice beseeching, “Do you have any basis for these claims, or are you simply repeating the things you’ve been told?”

Petra looked over at Tabitha, her face pale and furious. “Only the totality of recorded history, and the living memories of those who experienced it first-hand,” she spat. “It is incumbent on you, I suggest, to provide proof for your claims that Lord Voldemort was anything other than what all of accepted record tells us he was.”

“Since you mention that,” Tabitha said smoothly. “I believe that there are individuals here this evening who were first-hand witnesses to the Battle of Hogwarts. We could settle accounts right now, if we desired, by interviewing them in person. This is not a courtroom, though, so I will merely ask the following: can anyone in attendance, anyone who was there at the Battle, deny that Lord Tom Riddle himself stated for all to hear that he deplored the loss of any blood in battle? Can anyone deny that he pleaded with his enemies to meet with their leader personally, so that violence could be avoided?”

Tabitha peered out over the audience. There was perfect silence but for the distant drone of the crickets and the creak of wind in the trees of the Forbidden Forest.

“No, none deny it because it is the truth.” she said, almost kindly. “Many died, of course. But it is a matter of fact that many more died than Lord Tom Riddle desired. All because those who opposed him could not bear for him to be known as anything other than a murderous madman.”

Petra had regained her composure. She spoke now, clearly and strongly. “And is it the act of a peace-loving reformer to seek out and personally murder the family of an infant, then attempt to murder the infant as well?”

“You speak of Harry Potter, then?” Tabitha said, not missing a beat. “The man who, ironically, happens to be the head of the Auror Department?”

“You deny it is true, then?”

“I deny nothing. I simply question and challenge. I suggest only that the truth is a far more complex thing than we have been allowed to believe. I submit that allegations of cold-blooded murder and attacks on children, all of which are rather conveniently unproveable, factor very well into the doctrine of fear that has ruled us these past twenty years.”

“How dare you!” James heard his own voice before he realized he’d meant to speak. He was standing, pointing at Tabitha Corsica, trembling with rage. “How dare you call my dad a liar! That monster killed his parents! My grandparents are *dead* because of him and you stand there and tell us that it’s some sort of made-up story! How dare you!” His voice cracked.

“I’m sorry,” Tabitha said, and her face was, indeed, a portrait of compassion. “I know you believe that is true, James.”

Professor Franklyn had stood and was moving forward, but James shouted again before Franklyn could speak.

“My dad killed your great hero!” he called, his eyes blurring with tears of rage. “That monster tried to kill my dad twice, the second time because my dad gave himself to him. Your great *saviour* was a *monster*, and my dad finally defeated him!”

“Your father,” Tabitha said, her voice rising and becoming stern. “was a half-rate wizard with a good PR department. If it wasn’t for the fact that he’d been surrounded by greater wizards than himself at every turn, we wouldn’t even know his name today.”

At that, the crowd exploded again, angry outbursts and shouts filling the space like a cauldron. There was a clatter on-stage. James looked and saw that Ralph, who’d never even spoken, had jumped up, knocking over his chair. Tabitha turned and looked at him, and he met her eyes for a second. *Sit down*, she mouthed at him, her eyes livid. Ralph returned her glare, then turned resolutely and left the stage. James saw it, and even in the midst of his anguish and fear at the nearly rioting crowd, his heart rejoiced.

There was no point in continuing the debate any further. Headmistress McGonagall joined Professor Franklyn on the stage and both shot red flares from their wands, restoring order to the Amphitheater. With no preamble, the Headmistress instructed all the students to return immediately to their common rooms. Her face was stern and very pale. As the crowd muttered and grumbled, funneling through the arched entryway back into the castle proper, James saw Ralph working toward him through the crowd. He moved aside until the larger boy caught up.

“I can’t do it anymore.” Ralph said to James, his voice low and his eyes downcast. “I’m sorry she said those terrible, stupid things. You can keep hating me if you want, but I just can’t keep up with all this

Progressive Element rubbish. I don't know anything about it, really, except that it's just too much work to be so... so *political*."

James couldn't help grinning. "Ralph, you're a brick. I don't hate you. I should apologize to you."

"Well, let's apologize later, OK?" Ralph said, working his way toward the archway with James following in his wake. "Right now, I just want to get out of here. Tabitha Corsica has been staring holes into me ever since I left the stage. Besides, Zane says that Ted's invited us to hang out in your common room. He wants to gloat over having won over a member of team B."

"That won't bother you?" James asked.

"Nah," Ralph replied, shrugging. "It's worth it. Gryffindors have better snacks."