



14. THE HALL OF ELDERS' CROSSING

“What? Why do we need to steal her broom, anyway?” Ralph exclaimed at breakfast the next morning. He leaned over the table, reaching for a plate of sausages. “It would be *loads* harder to steal than Jackson’s case was. Boys aren’t even *allowed* in the girls dorms. We’d never get near it! Besides, we’ve got the robe already. They can’t do anything without all the relics.”

“It’s the Merlin staff, that’s why we have to get it,” James replied. “Even on its own, it’s got to be one of the most powerful magical objects in the world. You saw what Tabitha Corsica did with it at the match. And it wasn’t just her shadowing the snitch without even looking. Her whole team seemed to respond to it somehow, or at least their brooms did. They knew just where to be at all the right moments. That’s some really powerful magic. So far, she’s only using the staff to win Quidditch matches, but do you really want something like that in the hands of someone like her and the Progressive Element?”

Ralph looked dour. Zane put his coffee cup down and stared at the tabletop. “I don’t know...” he said.

“What?” James said impatiently.

Zane glanced up. “Well, it just seems too easy, really. I mean, first there was Ralph’s buddy’s rock hound bag that showed up at just the right time. Then, no matter how you look at it, we got really lucky with that visum-ineptio charm. Even before that, look at all the coincidences that led to you discovering the hiding place of the Merlin throne, from catching a glimpse of the voodoo queen on the lake that night to finding that *Daily Prophet* article about the break-in at the Ministry. And now, we just happen to figure out that Tabitha’s broom is the Merlin staff. I hate to say it, but it can’t be much of a dark conspiracy if a trio of first-year shlubbs like us have worked it all out.”

James fumed. “All right, yeah, so we’ve gotten lucky here and there. We’ve worked really hard and been extremely careful, too. And besides, it all fits, doesn’t it? Just because the people behind the Merlin plot have been too arrogant to think anybody could catch them doesn’t mean the plot isn’t for real. What about what happened when we opened Jackson’s case? And I didn’t even tell you what happened to me last week!”

Ralph jumped, almost knocking over his pumpkin juice. His eyes were wild for a second, and then he calmed himself. “Last week? When?”

“The night we went to see Hagrid, right after I left you,” James answered. He described the way the halls of Hogwarts had transformed into forest around him, his strange journey to the Island of the Grotto Keep, and the mysterious ghostly figure that had instructed him to bring her the relic robe. Zane listened with keen interest, but Ralph’s face was pale and blank.

When James finished, Zane asked, “You think it really was a dryad?”

James shrugged. “I don’t know. It sure looked a lot like the one we saw in the forest, but different, too. It *pulsed*, if you know what I mean. I could feel it in my head.”

“Maybe it was a dream,” Zane said carefully. “It sure sounds like one.”

“It wasn’t a dream. I was in the corridor heading to the common room. I wasn’t sleepwalking.”

“I’m just saying,” Zane said blandly, lowering his eyes.

“What?” James prodded. “You think that whole Merlin thing was a dream too? When I disappeared from the room right in front of the both of you and Cedric Diggory’s ghost had to bring me back?”

“Of course not. Still, it just sounds kind of crazy. Were you in the forest or were you in the corridor? Which one was real? Were either of them real? I mean, you’ve been thinking about all of this an awful lot. Maybe...”

Ralph was studying his empty plate. He spoke without raising his head. “It wasn’t a dream.”

James and Zane both looked at Ralph. “How do you know, Ralph?” Zane asked.

Ralph sighed. “Because the same thing happened to me.”

James’ eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. “You saw the Grotto Keep? And the dryad, too? Ralph, why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t know what they were!” Ralph said, looking up. “I wasn’t with you two when you went out in the forest and saw the Island and met the dryad, remember? So last week, I was on my way through the cellars to the Slytherin rooms and all of a sudden the cellars just faded out and turned into a forest, same as you described, James. I saw the Island and the tree-sprite lady, but I didn’t recognize them. I thought she was a ghost or something. She told me to bring the relic to her, but I was scared. I’m not used to having weird, magical, out-of-body experiences or anything. I tried to run away, but then, all of a sudden I was standing outside the door to the Slytherin common room, plain as could be. I was worried about my sanity, to tell the truth. I thought all this magical stuff was making me soft in the head. Frankly, I’m a little relieved that the same thing happened to you, too.”

“I can see why,” Zane said, nodding.

“But why you?” James asked. “You don’t have the relic. I do.”

Zane tilted his head and cinched a corner of his mouth up in that expression of comical concentration he put on when he was thinking hard. “Maybe it’s as simple as the fact that Ralph’s a Slytherin. I mean, he *was* in the debate against Petra and me. Maybe whatever it was thinks Ralph is the weakest link. Maybe it thinks it can get Ralph to betray you and steal the robe and then bring it to the Island. Not that you would, Ralph.” Zane added, looking at Ralph.

“No way. I’m never touching that thing,” Ralph concurred.

“I guess that makes sense,” James admitted. “So why not you, then, Zane?”

Zane adopted a beatific expression, eyes raised to the ceiling, “Because I’m as pure as the wind-driven snow. And besides, I’m never setting foot on that Island again. Too freaky for me by far.”

“But I couldn’t even steal the robe if I wanted to,” Ralph said, furrowing his brow. “Not with Zane’s locking spell on it. James is the only one who can open the trunk.”

“You could just drag the whole trunk out there, I suppose,” James replied. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“Fortunately, there’s no will.” Ralph said gravely.

Zane pushed his empty coffee cup away. “The dryad, or whatever it was, wouldn’t necessarily know about the extra locking spell on the trunk, anyway. But the fact that it happened to both of you sure proves something wants that robe, and knows we have it. If it isn’t Jackson or any of his crew, then who?”

James said, "Remember what the green dryad told us? She said that the trees were waking, but that many of them had... how did she put it?"

Zane nodded, remembering. "She said they'd 'gone over', like milk past its expiration date or something. Some of the trees are bad, in other words. They're on the side of chaos and war. You think you and Ralph's blue dryad was one of the bad ones trying to sound nice?"

"Makes sense," Ralph said. "She was all beautiful and smiles and everything, but I had a pretty strong feeling that if I didn't bring her the robe, that smile could turn hungry pretty fast. That's what scared me. That and her fingernails." He shuddered.

"So this is way bigger than just us and the Merlin conspirators," Zane said seriously. "The tree spirits are involved. And who knows what else, too. For all we know, everything in the magical world might be taking a side."

"Either way," James said earnestly, "it proves that these relics are incredibly powerful. In the wrong hands, who knows what kind of damage they could do. That's why we have to get the staff away from Tabitha."

"I don't understand why we don't just get your dad in here," Ralph interjected. "It's his job to deal with this kind of stuff, isn't it?"

"Because they have rules they have to follow," James replied wearily. "They'd have to bring in a team of aurors to scour the grounds. They wouldn't just go nick Tabitha's broom because we said it was the Merlin staff, even if we did turn over the robe. There'd be magical sweeps, investigating every unusual source of power. It could go on for days. By the time they got around to checking out Tabitha, she'd have gotten the broom out of here. Jackson and Delacroix might sniff trouble and escape, too. They might even get the whole conspiracy together to go to this Hall of Elder's Crossing and try to bring Merlin back. It wouldn't work without the robe, of course, but then the throne and the staff would be lost, hidden and in the control of dark wizards."

Ralph sighed. "All right, all right. I'm convinced. So we'll try to capture the Merlin staff from Corsica. But that's it, all right? Then we turn it all over to your dad and his pros. They clean up the mess and we can be the heroes. Whatever. OK?"

Zane nodded. "Yeah, I'm with you. Get the broom and we're done. Agreed?"

James agreed. "So we need a plan. Any ideas?"

"It won't be easy," Ralph said firmly. "If we got lucky with Jackson's briefcase then we'll need an act of God to pull this one off. The Slytherin quarters are so thick with guard hexes and anti-spying charms that they almost hum. They're the most suspicious lot I've ever met."

“Tricksters always expect to be tricked,” Zane said wisely. “But there’s one thing we’re forgetting, and it may even be more important than capturing the Merlin staff.”

“What’s more important than that?” James asked.

“Keeping the relic we’ve got.” Zane answered simply, meeting James’ eyes. “Something out there knows we have the robe, and it’s already tried once to get it from you. I don’t know what kind of magic that was, but you both seem pretty convinced that it transported you to the Island straight out of Hogwarts halls, right?”

James and Ralph exchanged looks and then nodded at Zane.

“So,” Zane continued, “If disapparation is impossible on Hogwarts grounds, then it used some other form of magic to get you there. That’s some powerful mojo. What’s to say it won’t try again?”

Ralph paled. “I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“Maybe it used up all its power the first time,” James said a little doubtfully.

“You two better hope so,” Zane said, looking back and forth between them. “Because it already tried asking nice. The next time it won’t be so polite.”

An idea struck James and he shivered.

“What?” Ralph asked, seeing James’ face change.

“Remote physio-apparation,” James said in a hushed voice. “That’s what Professor Franklyn called Delacroix’s power to project a wraith of herself. It’s different from regular apparation, because she just sends out something like a ghost of herself, but the wraith can still look solid and affect things. I looked it up. The ghost makes a solid version of itself out of whatever material is handy, and then wears that like a puppet. Somehow she used it to bring the Merlin throne here and hide it on the Island without being detected.”

Zane frowned. “OK. So?”

“So what if that was how Ralph and I were sent out to the Grotto Keep? Ralph, you called it an out-of-body experience. What if that’s what it really was? Maybe we were forced to have a remote-physio apparation! Only a wraith of ourselves went out to the Grotto, but our bodies stayed in the corridors just sort of... frozen.”

Ralph was clearly horrified by the thought. Zane looked thoughtful. “It seems to fit. Both of you said it happened when you were alone in the corridors. There’d be no one to see you both standing there on autopilot while your souls or whatever were strung out to the Grotto Keep.”

“But that’s Delacroix’s specialty,” Ralph said, shuddering. “You think she knows we got the robe somehow?”

James answered, “Maybe. She’s slippery as an eel. She might have figured it out and not even told Jackson. Maybe she wants all the glory for herself.”

“One thing is for sure, then.” Zane announced. “We can’t let you two be alone. My guess is that whoever or whatever is doing this doesn’t want the secret to get out. That’s why they waited until you two were alone for a few minutes. If we keep people around you, then maybe it won’t try again.”

Ralph was as white as a statue. “Unless it gets really, really desperate.”

“Well, yeah,” Zane agreed. “There’s always that possibility. But we can’t do anything in that case, so let’s just hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“That makes me feel loads better.” Ralph moaned.

“Come on,” James said, getting up from the breakfast table. “It’s getting late and the house elves are giving us the eye. It’s time we got out of here before somebody notices we’re planning something.”

The three boys wandered out onto the chilly grounds and talked of other things for a while, then, having separate House-related obligations, went their separate ways for the rest of the day.

The next week was frustratingly busy. Neville Longbottom assigned one of his very unusual but painstakingly demanding essays. This led to James spending an inordinate amount of time in the library, researching the endless uses of spynuswort, an endeavor that was further complicated by the fact that every part of the spynuswort plant, from the leaves to the stem to the root and even its seeds, was used in any number of applications, from healing skin diseases to waxing broomsticks. James had just added the seventy-ninth entry to his scribbled list when Morgan Patonia sat down at the table across from him with a heavy sigh. Morgan, a first year Hufflepuff, was also in Herbology and working on her spynuswort essay.

“You only need to list five uses.” Morgan stated when she saw James’ list. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Five?” James said weakly.

Morgan gave James a look of somehow delighted disdain. “Professor Longbottom only assigned us to write about spynuswort because it’s one of the three most useful plants in the magical world. If we were to write about every one of its uses we’d be turning in encyclopedias, you silly boy.”

James’ face heated. “I knew that!” he said, aiming for aloof arrogance and hitting only wounded petulance. “I just forgot. Can’t blame me for being thorough, can you?”

Morgan giggled, obviously thrilled that James had wasted so much time. James packed up a few minutes later and moved to the Gryffindor common room, annoyed but simultaneously relieved. At least his essay was finished. In fact, since he’d already written about twenty-three spynuswort uses, he probably stood

to get loads of extra credit. Just as long as Neville didn't figure out that the thoroughness of James' report simply meant James hadn't been paying much attention in class.

Twice, James saw Professor Delacroix in the corridors and had the haunting sensation that she was watching him. He never actually saw her eyes on him, but since she was blind, that hardly mattered anyway. James remembered the way Delacroix had maneuvered the tureen of gumbo with her ugly graperoot wand at the Alma Aleron dinner, never spilling a drop. He had a suspicion that Delacroix had ways of seeing that didn't rely at all upon her useless eyes. In fact, that could explain how she might have noticed that Jackson's briefcase was different. The visum-ineptio charm only worked on what people saw with their eyes, didn't it? Still, she never said anything, or even so much as paused in her stride when she passed him. James decided that he was simply being paranoid. Besides, as Zane pointed out, what difference did it make? She might be the one trying to trick Ralph and James into taking the relic robe out to the Grotto Keep, or it might be some other force entirely. Either way, they had to be on guard never to be alone, and in the end, the source of the threat didn't really matter anyway.

James had begun to realize just how hard it was to never be alone. He would've thought, in a school the size of Hogwarts, it would've been quite rare, anyway. Now that he was paying attention, he realized he'd been on his own on the grounds or in the halls several times each day, whether crossing the grounds to get to Neville Longbottom's Herbology class after Transfiguration, or just going to the bathroom in the middle of the night. Arranging to never be alone even in these circumstances was an annoying chore, but Zane, to James' surprise, was consistently adamant about it.

"Even if we did capture that robe by a string of completely freakish lucky breaks, I'm not gonna let it slip out of our hands because we got careless," he told James one day, walking him to the Herbology greenhouses. "It's the Merlin conspirators' carelessness that's been working for us. I'm not gonna do them any favors like that."

One day, James introduced Ralph and Zane to the protean charm as a means of communicating if ever an emergency chaperone was needed. James had ordered three novelty rubber ducks from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, giving one each to Zane and Ralph.

"The protean charm means that if I squeeze my duck, both of yours will sound as well," James explained, giving his duck a tweak.

"Sod off!" all three ducks quacked in unison.

"Excellent," Zane said, giving his own duck a firm squeeze, resulting in a chorus of happy insults. "So if either of you find yourselves alone or need me to take you to the bathroom, you just whonk on this and I come running, eh?"

"Ugh," Ralph said, staring at his duck with distaste. "I hate this. It's like being three years old again."

“Hey, if you want to go getting zapped off to meet with some unhappy tree spirit again...” Zane said, shrugging.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it,” Ralph replied, annoyed. “I just hate it, is all.”

Zane turned back to James. “So how will I know which one of you quacked for me?”

James produced a black marker and drew a small J on the bottom of his duck. “Take a look at yours, now. Anything we do to a single duck will show up on all of them. When you hear the quack, just check the bottom of the duck and see whose initial shows up.”

“Very tight,” Zane said approvingly. He raised his duck and tweaked it as if he was saluting with it.

“Eat doxie poo!” The ducks quacked gaily.

“All right,” James said, putting his own duck in his backpack. “This’ll only work if we only use them in an emergency. Got it?”

“Why don’t they just squeak?” Ralph asked as he pocketed his.

“Ask a Weasley.” James answered dismissively.

At first, having to have Zane or somebody else around at all times was as annoying to James as it was to Ralph, but eventually James got used to it and even began to like it. Zane would sit on a chair in the corner of the bathroom while James bathed, quizzing him on defensive spell pronunciations or Transfiguration terminology and restrictions. James learned that many of his Herbology classmates, including Morgan Patonia, had charms class before Herbology. Knowing this, James was able to hurry from his Transfiguration class to the Charms classroom and then accompany Patonia and her friends to the greenhouses, thus avoiding the solitary trek across the grounds. Constantly being near people became an easy habit for James, and eventually he nearly forgot he was doing it. In this fashion, the weeks melted past. The rawness of winter began to thaw into the fragile warmth of spring. Still, neither James, Ralph nor Zane had come up with a plan to get Tabitha Corsica’s broomstick. Eventually they determined, albeit reluctantly, that some group reconnaissance was required.

“I’m not liking this,” Ralph said as he led the other two to the door of the Slytherin common room. “I haven’t seen anyone other than Slytherins in here for months.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ralph,” Zane said, but his voice was less confident than usual. “We’ve got James’ magic map here. We can check it again, but according to it, most of your buddies are out watching the Slytherins practice for the tournament. Right, James?”

James had the Marauder’s Map unfolded in his hands. He studied it as he walked. “As far as I can tell, there’s only a couple of people in the Slytherin dorms, and none of them are people we need to worry about.”

“Are you sure you’re reading that thing right?” Ralph asked, plugging his ring into the eye socket of the snake sculpture on the gigantic wooden door. “Last I heard, you said you couldn’t even remember how to get it to work.”

“Well, it’s working, isn’t it?” James replied testily. In truth, he *was* worried about the accuracy of the map. He had remembered the phrase to get the map to open and display the grounds, but as his dad had feared, the castle had changed rather a lot since the map had been created by Moony, Prongs, Padfoot and Wormtail. Irregular chunks of the map were completely blank, and each blank section was marked with a notation that read *re-drawing required; please see Messers. Prongs and Padfoot for assistance*. James could only guess that his Grandfather and Sirius Black had been the chief artists who’d plotted the map, but since both were long since dead, there would apparently be no re-drawing of the map to fill in the rebuilt areas. The tiny names that marked the locations of everyone on campus could still be seen moving here and there, but as they entered one of the blank areas, their marker and name would flicker out. Fortunately, the Slytherin quarters were under the lake, and therefore had been very little damaged in the Battle of Hogwarts (Ralph had learned that only the main entry had been destroyed in the siege). James could see the entire warren of Slytherin rooms and halls on the Marauder’s Map.

The snake sculpture asked its questions. Ralph announced himself and explained who James and Zane were, and that they were friends. The glowing green snake eye examined Zane and James for a long moment, and then unlocked the complicated system of bolts and bars that secured the door.

The three boys couldn’t help skulking as they moved through the apparently deserted Slytherin common room. The brackish green sunlight, filtered by the lake water above the stained glass ceilings, filled the room with murky shadows. The fire was a dull red glow in the gigantic fireplace, which was sculpted in marble to resemble an open snake’s mouth.

“Nothing like reading a good book in front of gaping doom,” Zane murmured, passing the fireplace. “So where do they keep their broomsticks, Ralph?”

Ralph shook his head. “I told you already, I don’t know. I just know there isn’t a common locker or anything, like the Gryffindors or Ravenclaws. Most of these guys don’t trust each other all that much. Everybody has a private closet with a special magical key. Besides, their brooms aren’t here now, anyway, are they? They’ve all got them out at the Quidditch pitch.”

“We aren’t here to grab it now,” Zane answered, peering around the common room. “We’re just here to scope out where they might hide them.”

Even in the middle of a spring day, the Slytherin rooms were a pall of shifting green dimness. “Lumos,” James said, illuminating his wand and holding it aloft. “This hall goes back to the boys’ quarters, right Ralph?”

“Yeah. The girls’ rooms are on the other side, up those stairs.”

Zane threaded through the furniture of the common room, aiming for the stairs. “Panty raid in the Slytherin girls’ quarters. I’m on it.”

“Wait,” James said sharply. “It’ll be charmed, you know. No boys are allowed in any of the girls’ quarters. You go up there, it’ll be sure to set off some sort of alarm.”

Zane stopped, glancing at James, and then turned back to the stairway. “Drat. They thought of everything, didn’t they?”

“Besides,” Ralph said from across the room. “They’re called ‘knickers’ around here.”

“You say potato, I say patata...” Zane muttered.

“Can we get back to why we’re here, after all?” James said as loudly as he dared. “We’re supposed to be looking for ways to get to Tabitha’s broom. Even if all we can do is figure out where she keeps it.”

“Believe it or not,” Zane said primly, “that’s what I was thinking of. For all we know she sleeps with the thing. Even if she doesn’t, you can bet she keeps it near enough to guard. That means getting into the girls’ quarters, doesn’t it?”

James shook his head. “Not possible. I’m beginning to see how helpful it was for my dad to have aunt Hermione as part of his crew. He could’ve sent her up to check things out. We’re pretty much stuck, though.”

As James finished speaking, a noise came from the stairway. The three boys froze guiltily, looking toward the stairs. There was a shuffling of small feet, and then a tiny house elf came down balancing a basket of crumpled clothing on its head. The elf stopped, seeing the three boys staring at it.

“Many pardons, masters,” The elf said, and James could tell by the timbre of its voice that it was a female. “Just collecting the washing, if you please.” Her bulbous eyes flicked between the three of them. She seemed disconcerted to have elicited such keen interest. James realized she was probably used to being completely ignored, if she was seen at all.

“Not a problem, Miss...?” Zane said, affecting a small bow and taking a step back from the stairs.

The elf didn’t move. Her eyes followed Zane’s movement with increasing consternation. “Excuse me, master?”

“Your name, Miss?” Zane replied.

“Ah. Er. Figgle, master. I apologize, master. Figgle isn’t accustomed to masters and mistresses speaking to her, master.” The elf seemed to be nearly vibrating with nervousness.

"I'm sure that is true, Figgle," Zane said understandingly. "You see, I'm a member of an organization you may have heard of. We're called the... uh..." Zane glanced back at James, his eyes wide. James remembered telling Zane and Ralph about aunt Hermione's equal rights for elves organization.

James stuttered, "Oh. Yeah, Spew. The Society for the Promotion of, uh, Elfish Welfare?"

"Yes, what he said," Zane said, spinning back to Figgle, who flinched. "Spew. You've heard of us, no doubt. We help those who elf themselves."

"Figgle hasn't, master. Not a bit. Figgle has loads of work, master."

"That's exactly the point, my dear Figgle. We at Spew are working to lessen that load. In fact, as an act of good faith, I'd like to help you now. Please, might I help you carry that?"

Figgle looked positively horrified. "Oh, *no*, master. Figgle couldn't! Master shouldn't mock Figgle, sir!"

James could see where Zane was heading with this charade, but was doubtful it would get anywhere. House elves, especially those who worked amongst the Slytherins, were often mistreated and tricked by their masters. Figgle looked as if she was about to burst into tears from fear.

Zane knelt down, bringing himself eye-level to the trembling house elf on the second step of the stairs. "Figgle, I'm not going to hurt you or get you into trouble. I promise. I'm not even a Slytherin. I'm a Ravenclaw. You know Ravenclaws?"

"Figgle does, master. Figgle collects the Ravenclaws' wash on Tuesdays and Fridays. Ravenclaws use less scent than Slytherins, master." The elf was babbling, but she seemed a bit calmer.

"I'd like to help you, Figgle. Surely there is more to carry. May I carry it for you?"

Figgle pressed her lips together very hard, obviously caught on the knife-edge between her fear of a mean prank and her duty to do what she was told. Her tennis-ball sized eyes studied Zane, then, finally, she nodded once, quickly.

"Excellent, Figgle. You're a good elf," Zane said soothingly. "There is more laundry upstairs, isn't there? I see you're piling it there by the door. I'll gather the rest for you." He made to step forward onto the stairs.

"Oh, no, master! Wait!" Figgle said, raising her hand. The basket on her head wobbled a bit and she steadied it easily. "Master will break the boundary. Figgle mustn't let the others see she is being helped." Figgle jumped lightly down the last two steps and turned toward the stairs. She raised her hand and snapped her fingers. Something changed about the doorway. James would have sworn that something like a light had been turned off, although the actual lighting in the room hadn't changed. "Now master can go up. But, please, master..." Again, Figgle seemed tortured on the edge of fear and obedience. "Please, master mustn't

touch anything but the basket. Then Figgle will take all the wash to the basements. Please?” She seemed to be pleading to get this over with and be gone as soon as possible.

“Of course,” Zane answered, smiling. With only the slightest pause, he put his foot on the first step. Nothing happened. “I’ll be right back, guys,” Zane said over his shoulder, then trotted up the steps.

James let out a pent breath and heard Ralph doing the same. Figgle watched Zane tramp up the stairs, then glanced worriedly back at James and Ralph. Ralph shrugged at her and smiled. It was, James thought, a rather ghastly smile. Figgle didn’t seem to notice. She weaved through the furniture, balancing the huge basket easily, and then tipped it onto a large pile near the door.

“James,” Ralph said quietly. “The map.”

James nodded and opened the Marauder’s Map again. He looked first toward the upper right area of the map, where a set of neat drawings illustrated the Quidditch pitch and grandstands. Dozens of names were crammed together there, most in and around the grandstands, but a few swooped around the pitch. The Slytherin practice session was still going on, although there seemed to be fewer people on brooms at the moment. They were probably gathered on the ground nearby, talking strategy or something. He glanced over the names ranged between the pitch and the grandstands. There was Squallus, Norbert and Beetlebrick and a few others James didn’t know.

Figgle raised her hands in the same gesture James had seen the house elves in the great hall use to gather up the tablecloths. The pile of laundry clumped into a large ball and a bed sheet cocooned around it, the four corners tying at the top. Figgle tossed a small puff of pink powder onto the gigantic ball of laundry and snapped her fingers again. The ball of laundry vanished, presumably to reappear in the basements. She looked nervously at the stairs.

“Well?” Ralph asked James in a tight, worried voice.

“I can’t see Tabitha,” James answered, trying to keep his voice calm. “Or Philia Goyle. They aren’t out on the pitch anymore as far as I can see.”

“What? Well where are they?”

“I don’t know. They seem to be off the map at the moment.”

Figgle was looking at them, her eyes wide and alert. She seemed to sense something was even more wrong than it had been a minute ago. James studied the Marauder’s Map keenly, watching the huge blank spots to see if Goyle and Corsica would appear out of them. He kept a sharp eye on the blank spot at the door to the Slytherin quarters.

“Oh, no,” he said, his eyes widening. “Here they come! What are they doing here now?”

“Get rid of the map!” Ralph said, his face going pasty white. “Come on! Zane!” he called up the steps. There was no answer.

Figgle’s expression had gone from alarm to raw panic. “Mistress Corsica is coming! Figgle has done an awful thing! Figgle will be punished!” She bolted for the stairs, snapping her fingers as she went. There was that sudden sensation of change, as if an invisible light had popped back on, and James knew that the boundary charm over the stairs was in place again. There was a clatter of footsteps and muffled voices both from upstairs as well as from the front door of the common room. James balled the Marauder’s Map roughly and jammed it into his open backpack. Ralph threw himself onto the nearest couch, trying to affect a scene of lazy indolence. The door swung open just as James re-shouldered his backpack and turned.

Tabitha Corsica and Philia Goyle stepped through the doorway. Their eyes fell on James and both of them went silent. Tabitha was dressed in a sport cloak and black capris, her broomstick over her shoulder. Her hair was in a neat pony tail, and even though she had, only minutes before, been swooping over the Quidditch pitch on her unusually magical broom, she appeared as cool and fresh as a tulip. She spoke first.

“James Potter,” she said mildly, having almost instantly recovered from her surprise at seeing him. “What a pleasure.”

“What are you doing here,” Philia demanded, scowling.

“Philia, don’t be rude,” Tabitha said, moving into the room and passing James breezily. “Mr. Potter is as welcome among us as I’m sure we would be amongst the Gryffindors. If we don’t have goodwill during these difficult times, what have we got? Good afternoon, Mr. Deedle.”

Ralph croaked something from the couch, looking remarkably awkward and uncomfortable. Philia continued to stare hard at James, her expression openly hostile, but she remained silent.

“It’s a shame about the Gryffindor Quidditch team,” Tabitha called from a corner of the room as she hung up her cloak. “We always love a Gryffindor versus Slytherin match for the tournament, don’t we Ralph? I’m sure it pains your friends not to be out scrimmaging with us as we speak, James. Please give them our sympathies. By the way...” Tabitha crossed the room again, heading toward the stairs to the girls’ sleeping quarters. “I saw several of the Ravenclaw players out at the pitch studying our drills. Interesting that your friend Zane wasn’t among them. You haven’t seen him, have you?” She tapped her broomstick on the floor idly, watching James’ face.

James shook his head, not daring to speak.

“Hm,” Tabitha murmured thoughtfully. “Curious, that. Nevertheless. Come, Philia.”

James watched, horrified, as Tabitha and Philia began to climb the steps. He thought furiously, trying to invent a quick diversion, but nothing came.

“Sod off!” a pair of muffled voices suddenly squeaked.

Both Tabitha and Philia stopped in their tracks. Philia, on the first step, whipped around angrily. Tabitha, ahead of her, turned much more slowly, a look of polite wonderment on her face.

“Did you say something?” she asked James slowly.

James coughed. “Er, no. Sorry. Got a, uh, frog in my throat.”

Tabitha watched him for a long moment, then tilted her head slightly and narrowed her eyes at Ralph. Finally, she turned away and disappeared up the rest of the stairs with Philia following, glancing back furiously. After a few moments, their footsteps could be heard from above. There were no angry screams or sounds of struggle.

“Grotty blighter!” quacked the muffled voices again.

“That crazy loon!” Ralph rasped, jumping up and grabbing his bag. “What’s he doing?”

“Come on!” James said, lunging toward the door. “If he’s still up there, we can’t help him.”

They both ran out into the hallway and threaded their way around several random corridors before finally stopping. Panting and hearts pounding, they dug their rubber ducks out of their bags, each examining his own even though they were identical. Two words were scrawled on the bottom of the ducks in black ink: *Laundry room!*

“That crazy loon!” Ralph said again, but he was almost laughing with relief. “Figgle just took him down to the cellars with the rest of the dirty sheets! I say we leave him there.”

James grinned. “No, let’s go get him before they try to stick him in the wringer. He probably deserves it, but first I want to know what he might have found out.”

The two boys ran to find the washrooms in the cellars. James stopped only once to ask directions from an annoyingly observant servant in a painting of a gaggle of dining knights.



"I hardly had two minutes to look around before Figgle came up the stairs like a cannonball," Zane told James and Ralph when they found him in the washrooms. "She threw a handful of pink dust at me, and then pow. I'm down here."

Ralph was looking around in awe at the enormous copper vats and the clanking machinery of the washers. Elves bustled around them, ignoring the three boys completely as they moved through the hive of their basement work space. Two elves on a catwalk above the vats were dumping wheelbarrows of powdered soap into the frothing water. White flakes filled the air and stuck like snow in the boys' hair.

"Trust me, this all gets a lot less interesting after two minutes or so," Zane said tersely. "Especially when the Lollipop Guild here won't let you leave." Three elves were clustered around Zane, looking at him with obvious hostility.

"Figgle brings a human down to the washrooms, we keeps him until someone explains why," The oldest and grumpiest elf said in a gravelly voice. "S'policy. Humans interfering with elf work is against Hogwarts code of conduct and practices, section thirty, paragraph six. So, then, who be you two?"

James and Ralph exchanged blank looks. Ralph said, "We're his... well, we're his friends, aren't we? We came to bring him back upstairs."

"Did you, then." The elf said with a penetrating glare. "Figgle tells a story about this human trying to do her work, she does. Says he was going on about elf welfare and such bilge. She was fair upset. Can't 'ave that sort of thing, you know. We gots a coalition agreement with the school."

"He won't do it again," James soothed. "He meant well, but he's a bit dim about such things, isn't he? I'm sorry. He got out of our hands for a minute. Won't happen again."

Zane acted offended but stayed wisely silent. The head elf scowled thoughtfully at James. James was used to elves being subservient and meek, or at least politely surly. Here, in their working realm, the rules appeared to be quite different. The elves had a coalition agreement with the school, the head elf had said. It almost sounded like they'd unionized, and that an essential rule of the elf union was that only elves did elf work. Perhaps they viewed it as job security. James wasn't sure if aunt Hermione would view this as an improvement or a setback.

Finally, the head elf grumbled, "I'm going against my better judgements, you know. The three of yous are on probation. Anymore interference with elfish protocol and I'll 'ave you before the headmistress. We gots a coalition agreement, you know."

"So I hear," Zane muttered, rolling his eyes.

"But you don't even know our names," Ralph pointed out. "How are we on probation if you don't know who we are?" James elbowed him in the ribs.

The head elf grinned at his fellows, who smiled back a bit disconcertingly. “We’re elves.” He said simply. “Now off with yous, and let’s hope we don’t see you again.”

The corridors leading out of the washrooms were, not surprisingly, small and short, with half-size steps that forced James, Zane and Ralph to mince carefully as they climbed them.

“I don’t know whether to congratulate you or kick you.” Ralph said to Zane. “You almost got us caught by Corsica and Goyle.”

“But I did get into the Slytherin girls’ sleeping quarters,” Zane pointed out with a grin. “How many people can say that?”

“Or would want to?” James added.

“Be nice or I won’t tell you what I found.”

“It better be good,” said Ralph.

“It’s not.” Zane sighed. “The girls’ quarters have big wooden wardrobes alongside each bed. Only one of them was open, but I got a peek inside. Let’s just say I’m not wondering where Tabitha keeps her broom anymore.”

They reached a larger door at the end of a flight of miniscule stairs. James pushed it open, thankful to be out of the heat and noise of the washrooms. “What do you mean?”

“Well, they’re magical wardrobes, of course, although they don’t lead to any fairy wonderlands. The one I looked into looked like a combination vanity and walk-in closet. Seemed like a boutique had exploded in there, to tell you the truth. One of those really froofy ones, but with a gothic-vampire flair to it. There was a bottle of vanishing cream on the vanity, and from the looks of it, I don’t think the vanishing part was a metaphor.”

“All the girls have a wardrobe like that?” Ralph asked.

“Sure looked like it.”

James frowned. “Our chances of getting into the Slytherin girls’ quarters again are pretty much zero. And even if we could, how would we even know which wardrobe was Corsica’s, much less even get it open?”

“I *told* you this was going to be right impossible,” Ralph reminded James.

“Smelled like my Grandma’s dresser in there, too,” Zane said.

“Will you let off with the details?” James exclaimed. “This is serious. We still don’t know where the Hall of Elder’s Crossing is, or when Jackson and Delacroix are planning to bring the elements together. For all we know, it could be tonight.”

“So?” Ralph said. “Like you said, they can’t do anything without all the relics.”

Zane sighed, turning sober. “Yeah, but if they try it and nothing works, then they’ll hide the rest of the relics and we’ll never get to them.”

Ralph threw up his hands. “Well? There’s got to be another way, then. I mean, she has to take the broom out of her wardrobe sometimes, right? We saw her with it today. What if we nick it somehow during a Quidditch match or something?”

Zane grinned. “I like that. Especially if we can do it when she’s a hundred feet or so in the air.”

“Impossible again,” James said in frustration. “Ever since my dad’s day, there’ve been protective spells all around the pitch to keep people from interfering with matches. There were a few instances where dark wizards tried to use spells to hurt him or throw him off his broom. Once, a bunch of dementors swarmed right onto the pitch. Ever since, there’ve been boundary areas set up by the officials. No spells can get in or out.”

“What’s a dementor?” Ralph asked, his eyes widening.

“You don’t want to know, Ralph. Trust me.”

“Well, then, looks like we’re back to square one,” Zane said dourly. “I’m all out of ideas.”

Ralph stopped suddenly in the middle of the corridor. Zane bumped into the larger boy, stumbling backwards, but Ralph didn’t seem to notice. He was staring hard at one of the paintings lining the corridor. James noticed it was the one they had stopped at earlier to ask for directions to the laundry room. The very observant servant in the rear corner of the painting had caught James’ attention on the way down, but only as someone they could get directions from. James had become almost inured to the random, watchful characters in the paintings all over Hogwarts. The servant stared sullenly out at Ralph as the knights in the painting hoisted their tankards and turkey drumsticks, slapping each other happily on their partially-armored backs.

“Oh, great,” Zane said, rubbing his shoulder where he’d run into Ralph. “Look what you’ve done, James. Now *Ralph*’s obsessed with every fifteenth painting. And not even the good ones, if you ask me. You two are the weirdest art lovers I’ve ever met.”

James took a step closer to the painting as well, studying the servant standing in the shadowy background with a large cloth over his shoulder. The figure took a half step backward, and James felt sure that it was trying to blend further into the dim recesses of the painted hall. “What, Ralph?” he asked.

“I’ve seen that before,” Ralph answered in a distracted voice.

“Well, we just stopped at this painting not ten minutes ago, didn’t we?”

“Yeah. It looked familiar then, too, but I couldn’t place it. He’s standing different now...”

Ralph suddenly dropped to one knee, flinging his backpack onto the floor in front of him. He unzipped it quickly and dug inside, almost frantically, as if worried that whatever inspiration had struck him would flee before he could confirm it. He finally produced a book, gripped it triumphantly, and stood up again, riffling toward the back. Zane and James crowded behind him, trying to see over Ralph's broad shoulders. James recognized the book. It was the antique potions book his mum and dad had given Ralph for Christmas. As Ralph flipped through the pages, James could see the notes and formulae that crowded the margins, crammed alongside doodled drawings and diagrams. Suddenly, Ralph stopped flipping. He held the book open with both hands and slowly raised it so that it was level to the observant servant in the background of the painting. James gasped.

"It's the same dude!" Zane said, pointing.

Sure enough, there, in the right-hand margin of one of the last pages of the potions book, was an old pencil sketch of the observant servant. It was unmistakably the same figure, right down to the hook nose and the sullen, stooped pose. The painted version recoiled from the book slightly, and then crossed the hall as swiftly as it could without actually running. It stopped behind one of the pillars lining the opposite side of the painted hall. The knights at the table ignored it. James, watching intently, narrowed his eyes.

"I knew it looked familiar," Ralph said triumphantly. "He was in a different position when we first came across him, so I didn't place it straight off. Just now, though, he was in exactly the same pose as the drawing in this book. Now *that* is weird."

"Can I see?" James asked. Ralph shrugged and handed the book to James. James bent over it, flipping back to the front of the book. The margins in the first hundred pages were filled mostly with notes and spells, many with sections scribbled out and re-written in a different color, as if the writer of the notes was refining his work. By the middle of the book, though, drawings and doodles began to crowd in with the notes. They were sketchy, but quite good. James recognized many of them. Here was a rough sketch of the woman in the background of the painting of the King's court. A few pages later he found two quite detailed drawings of the fat wizard with the bald head from the painting of the poisoning of Peracles. Again and again he recognized the sketches as the characters in the paintings all over Hogwarts, the secondary figures who'd been watching James and his friends with avid, unconcealed interest.

"Amazing," James said in a low, awed voice. "All these drawings are from paintings all over the school, you see?"

Ralph squinted at the drawings in the book, then back at the painting again. He shrugged. "It's weird, but not all that amazing, is it? I mean, the guy who owned this book was probably also a student here, right? Sounds like he was a Slytherin, like me. That's why your dad gave me the book. So whoever he was, he liked art. Lots of art lovers sketch from paintings. Big deal."

Zane's brow furrowed as he looked back and forth between the drawing of the observant servant and his painted equivalent, who was still skulking near the pillars in the background. "No, these aren't just sketches," he said, shaking his head slowly. "These are the originals, or so close it's impossible to tell the

difference. Don't ask me how I know. I just know. Whoever sketched these drawings was either a master forger... or he was the actual artist."

Ralph thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head. "That doesn't even begin to make sense. These paintings were painted at lots of different times. No way one bloke was responsible for all of them. Besides, a lot of these paintings are old. Way older than this book."

"It makes *perfect* sense," James said, clapping the potions book shut and looking down at the cover. "Whoever painted these didn't paint the whole paintings. Think about it: not a single one of these sketched characters is of a dominant person in any of the paintings. Every one of them is a drawing of some totally unimportant background character. Whoever drew these just *added* the characters into existing paintings."

Zane cinched up the corner of his mouth and furrowed his brow. "Why would anyone do that? It's like graffiti, but nobody would notice it except the guy who painted it. What's the fun in that?"

James was also thinking hard. He nodded slightly to himself, looking down at the old book in his hands again. "I think I have an idea," he said, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "We'll find out for sure. Tonight."



"Come on, Ralph!" James complained in a harsh whisper. "Quit tugging! You're yanking it up. You can see my feet!"

"I can't help it," Ralph moaned, crouching down as far as he could. "I know you said your dad and his mates used to do this all the time, but one of *them* was a girl, remember?"

"Yeah, and she didn't eat seven meals a day, either." Zane said.

The three of them shuffled down the darkened corridor, crammed under the invisibility cloak. They'd met at the base of the staircases, and apart from one tense moment when Steven Metzker, the Gryffindor prefect and brother of Noah, had passed them in the hall singing slightly off key, they had

encountered no one. When they reached the intersection near the statue of the one-eyed witch, James directed them to stop. The three of them maneuvered clumsily into a corner and James opened the Marauder's Map.

"I don't see why all three of us need to do this anyway," Ralph complained. "I trust you two. You could've just told me about it tomorrow at breakfast."

"You seemed plenty excited about it when we planned this, Ralphinator," Zane whispered. "You can't lose your nerve now."

"It was daytime, then. And I wasn't born with any nerve, just so you know."

"Shh," James hissed.

Zane bent over the map. "Is anyone coming?"

James shook his head. "No, looks safe. Filch is in his office downstairs. I don't know if he *ever* sleeps, but for now, at least, the coast is clear."

Ralph straightened up, pulling the invisibility cloak a foot off the floor. "Then why are we under this thing at all?"

"It's tradition," James said without looking up from the map.

"Besides," Zane added, "what good's having an invisibility cloak if we don't use it to float around the halls unseen every now and then?"

"There's nobody to see us, anyway." Ralph pointed out.

James directed them toward the right angle of the intersection and they shuffled on. Soon enough, they came to the gargoyle guarding the stairway to the headmistress' office. James could tell it was watching their feet under the raised cloak even though it remained perfectly still. James hoped that the password hadn't changed since he'd accompanied Neville to the headmistress' office a few months earlier.

He cleared his throat and said quietly, "Er, Gallowater?"

The gargoyle, which was relatively new, having replaced the one that had been damaged in the Battle of Hogwarts, stirred slightly, making a sound like a mausoleum door grating open. "Is that the one with the forest green field and the sky blue and red patterns?" it asked in a carefully measured voice. "I can never remember."

James conferred in harsh whispers with Ralph and Zane. "Forest green field? I don't even know what it is! It's just the word Neville used to get in!"

"How'd he answer the question, then?" Zane asked.

“It didn’t ask him any questions!”

“It’s a tartan pattern, I think,” Ralph rasped. “My grandmum is mad about them. Just say yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of *course* I’m not sure. Say no, then! How should I know?”

James turned back to the gargoyle, which seemed to be staring fixedly at James’ shoes. “Er, yeah, sure.”

The gargoyle rolled its eyes. “Lucky guess.” It straightened and stood aside, revealing the entry to the spiral staircase. The three boys shuffled toward it and clambered onto the lower steps. As soon as all three were on it, the staircase began to rise slowly, carrying them up with it. The hall outside the headmistress’ office lowered into view before them, and they stumbled into it, swearing and jostling each other under the cloak.

“That’s it,” Ralph said in an annoyed voice. He yanked at the cloak, struggling out from underneath it, and then let out a stifled shriek. James and Zane pulled the cloak off their heads and glanced around nervously, looking for whatever had startled Ralph. The ghost of Cedric Diggory was standing in front of them, smiling mischievously.

“You’ve really got to stop doing that,” Ralph said breathlessly.

Sorry, Cedric said in his far off voice. *I was asked to be here.*

“Who asked you?” James inquired, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice. The hair on the back of his neck was still prickling. “How would anyone know we were coming here tonight?”

Cedric just smiled and then gestured toward the heavy door that led into the headmistress’ office. It was shut tight. *How’d you plan to get past that?*

James felt his face heat a little in embarrassment. “I forgot about that,” he admitted. “Locked, is it?”

Cedric nodded. *Don’t worry about it. That’s why I’m here, I guess.* The ghost turned and walked effortlessly through the door. A moment later, the three boys heard the sounds of the lock being unbolted. The door swung open silently and Cedric grinned, welcoming them in. James entered first, and Zane and Ralph were surprised to see him turn immediately away from the headmistress’ massive desk. The room was extremely dim but for the reddish light of the banked fireplace. James lit his wand and held it up.

“Get that thing out of my face, Potter,” a voice drawled quietly. “You’ll wake the rest with it, and I suspect that this is meant to be a private conversation.”

James lowered his wand again and glanced around at the rest of the portraits. All of them were sleeping in various poses, snoring gently. “Yeah, you’re right,” James agreed. “Sorry.”

“So you deduced a version of the truth, I see.” the portrait of Severus Snape said, his black eyes locked on James. “Tell me what you believe you know.”

“It wasn’t much of a deduction, really,” James admitted, glancing at Ralph. “He figured it out. He’s got the book.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “That dratted book has been more trouble than it was ever worth. I should’ve destroyed it when I had the chance. Do continue.”

James took a deep breath. “Well, I knew something was going on when I noticed all those characters in the paintings watching us. I also knew they all looked a little familiar, even though they were all really different. I don’t think I’d have made the connection if Ralph hadn’t shown me the drawings in the potions book, though. I knew the book had belonged to a Slytherin my dad had loads of respect for, so I thought of you and it all just came together. *You* painted all those characters into the paintings all over the school, and every one of them is a portrait of you, but in disguise. That’s how you’ve been watching us. You spread yourself out through all those paintings. And since you are the original artist, nobody else can ever destroy the portraits. It was your way of assuring you could always keep an eye on things, even after death.”

Snape studied James, scowling. Finally he nodded slightly. “Yes, Potter, quite true. Few knew it, but I had some natural inclination toward the task. Being adept at potions, mixing the necessary enchanted paints was the simple part. It did take me quite some time to hone my rendering skills enough to modify the paintings, but as with any other art, painting was mainly a matter of practice and study. I agree with you, however, that you’d have never made the connection if it weren’t for my own blind arrogance in allowing that book to continue to exist. I may have been a genius, but pride has been the downfall of greater geniuses than myself. Nevertheless, it has proved to be a very successful endeavor. I have been able to observe you and the rest of this school’s operations rather freely. So tell me: why do you come to me now? To gloat over your luck?”

“No,” James said firmly, and then paused. He didn’t want to say what he’d come to say. He was afraid Snape would laugh at him, or worse, refuse their request. “We came... we came to ask for your help.”

Snape’s expression didn’t change. He regarded James seriously for a long moment. “You came to ask for help,” he said, as if confirming he’d heard James correctly. James nodded. Snape narrowed his eyes slightly. “James Potter, I’d never have suspected it, but you have finally impressed me. Your father’s greatest weakness was his refusal to seek assistance from those better and more knowledgeable than him. He always required their help in the end, but usually to their great, and sometimes final, detriment. You seem to have thrown off that weakness, albeit reluctantly. If you had come to this realization a few weeks ago, we might not have had to rely on pure fortune and good timing to save you from a fate worse than death.”

James nodded again. “Yeah, thanks for that. I know it was you who sent Cedric to help when we were going to open Jackson’s case.”

“Foolhardy and ignorant, Potter. You might’ve known better, although I admit I’d have been surprised if you had. The robe is exceedingly dangerous and you are stupendously negligent to keep it here. As much as I am loath to admit it, you should turn it over immediately to your father.”

“What do you know about the Merlin conspiracy, then?” James asked excitedly, ignoring the rebuke.

“I know little more than you do, unfortunately, other than the wealth of knowledge I’ve accumulated through my studies of the legend and the multitude previous attempts to facilitate the return of Merlinus Ambrosius. A study I can assure you would’ve proven far more helpful to you than your current ridiculous fantasies of capturing the Merlin staff.”

“Why are they ridiculous?” Zane asked, stepping a bit closer.

“Ah, the jester speaks,” Snape sneered in a low voice. “Mr. Walker, I believe.”

“It’s a fair question,” James said, glancing at Zane. “The staff is probably even more dangerous than the robe. We can’t let it be controlled by the sorts of people who believe Voldemort was just some misunderstood sweetie who wanted everybody to be pals.”

“And who might these people be, then, Potter?” Snape asked silkily.

“Well, Tabitha Corsica, for one.”

Snape regarded James with open contempt. “Typical Gryffindor prejudice.”

“Prejudice!” James exclaimed. “Whose House is it that believes that all Muggle-born wizards are weaker stock than the purebloods? Whose House invented the term ‘mudblood’?”

“Don’t *ever* say that word in front of me again, Potter,” Snape said dangerously. “You believe you speak of what you know, but let me save you from your ignorance by reminding you that what you know is as limited as it is one-sided. Easy judgments about individuals based on their House of origin is another of your father’s greatest mistakes. I’d hoped that you would surpass that as well, based on your own choice of companions.” Snape’s black eyes darted to Ralph, who had hung back, watching silently.

“Well, Ralph’s different, isn’t he?” James said weakly.

Snape responded quickly, his eyes still on the larger boy. “Is he? Different from what, Mr. Potter? What, precisely, do you believe you know about the members of Mr. Deedle’s House? Or, dare I ask, Mr. Deedle himself?”

“I know what the tree sprite told us,” James said rounding on the portrait, his voice rising in anger. “I know that there is a bloodline of Voldemort alive in these halls even now. His blood beats in a different heart. The heir of Voldemort is alive and he walks among us.”

“And what makes you so certain,” Snape said sharply, “that this heir is a Slytherin? Or a male?”

James opened his mouth to answer, and then closed it again. He realized that the dryad had never actually said either of those things. “Well, it just... makes sense.”

Snape nodded, the sneer creeping back into his face. “Does it? Perhaps you haven’t learned anything after all, then.” Snape sighed, and he seemed genuinely disappointed. “What did you come to ask, Potter? I see you are determined in your course regardless of what I say, so let’s get this over with.”

James felt small in front of the portrait of the former headmaster. Zane and Ralph stood further back, and James knew it was his question to ask. This was his battle more than it was theirs. His battle against the Merlin conspiracy, yes, but more importantly, his battle against himself and the shadow of his father.

He raised his eyes to Snape’s black gaze. “If we can’t get the Merlin staff, I need to go to the Hall of Elder’s Crossing. I need to stop them there, before they can hide the staff and the throne forever.”

James heard the movement of Zane and Ralph behind him. He turned back to them. “I won’t ask you two to come, but I’m committed. I have to try to stop them.”

Snape sighed hugely. “Potter, you really are just as foolish and preposterously self-absorbed as your father. Turn the robe over. Give it to your father or the headmistress. They will know what to do. I will advise them. You cannot possibly hope to manage this on your own. You’ve impressed me once. Do try and accomplish that again.”

“No.” James said with conviction. “If I tell them, Jackson and Delacroix and whoever else will get away. You know it just like I do. Then, two of the relics will be lost forever.”

“Without all three together, the power of the relics is broken.”

“But not destroyed,” James insisted. “They are still powerful on their own. We can’t let them be used by those who’d try to continue Voldemort’s work. We can’t risk them falling into the hands of Voldemort’s heir.”

Snape scowled. “*If* such a person exists.”

“That’s not a risk worth taking,” James countered. “Where is the Hall of Elder’s Crossing?”

“You do not know what you’re asking, Potter,” Snape said dismissively.

“We’ll find out somehow, James,” Zane said, stepping forward again. “We don’t need this old pile of paint to tell us. We’ve worked everything out so far. We’ll figure this out, too.”

“You’ve survived on suspicious good fortune and the interference of myself alone,” Snape growled. “Do not forget your place, boy.”

"It's true," Ralph said. James and Zane turned to look at him, surprised to hear him speak. Ralph swallowed and went on, "We *have* done pretty well so far. I don't really know who you are, Mr. Snape, but as grateful as we are for you helping us when James put on the robe, I think James is right. We need to try to stop them and get the rest of the relics. You were a Slytherin, and you said that the things they say about Slytherins aren't always right. Well, one of the things they say about Slytherins is that we always just look out for ourselves. I don't want that to be true. I'm with James and Zane, even if we fail. No matter what."

Snape had listened to this sudden speech from Ralph with a steely eye and a tight frown. When Ralph finished, he glanced at all three of the boys in succession, and then heaved another sigh. "You're all completely daft," he said flatly. "This is a pointless and destructive fantasy."

"Where's the Hall of Elder's Crossing?" James asked again.

Snape regarded him, shaking his head minutely. "As I said, Potter, you do not know what you're asking."

Zane spoke up. "Why not?"

"Because the Hall of Elders' Crossing is not a *place*, Mr. Walker. You, of all people, should have recognized that. If any of you had been paying even a shred of attention for the last several months, you'd know it. The Hall of Elders' Crossing is an *event*. Think about it for a moment, Mr. Walker. *Elders' Crossing*."

Zane blinked. "Elders," he said thoughtfully. "Wait a minute. That's what the astronomers of the middle-ages called the astrological signs. The planets. They called them the Elder Ones."

"So the *Hall* of Elder's Crossing..." James concentrated, and then widened his eyes in revelation. "The alignment of the planets! The Hall of Elders' Crossing is when all the planets cross each other in their paths. When they... make a hall!"

"The alignment of the planets," Ralph agreed in an awed voice. "It's not a place, but a time."

Snape stared hard at all three boys. "It's both," he said resignedly. "It's the moment the planets align, and it's the place that all three of the relics of Merlinus Ambrosius are brought together. That's when and where the return of Merlin can only be accomplished. That is his requirement. And unless I am greatly mistaken, if you mean to go through with this foolhardy plan of yours, you have less than one week."

Zane snapped his fingers. "That's why the voodoo queen's been drilling us to work out the exact moment of the alignment! She said it would be a night we'd never forget, and she meant it! That's when they mean to bring the relics together."

"The Grotto Keep," James whispered. "They'll do it there. The throne is already there." The other two boys nodded. James felt flushed with fear and excitement. He looked at the portrait of Severus Snape. "Thanks."

“Don’t thank me. Take my advice. If you plan to go through with this, I will not be able to help you. No one will. Don’t be a fool.”

James backed away, extinguishing his wand and pocketing it. “Come on, you two. Let’s get back.”

Snape watched as James consulted the Marauder’s Map. It wasn’t Snape’s first encounter with the map. On one occasion, the map had insulted him fairly cheekily. Having assured themselves that Filch was still in his office, the three crowded back under the invisibility cloak and shuffled back through the door of the headmistress’ office and into the hall. Snape considered waking Filch, who he knew was sleeping in his office with a half empty bottle of fire whiskey on his desk. One of Snape’s self portraits resided in a hunting painting in Filch’s office, and Snape could easily use that painting to alert Filch to the three boys’ sneaking. Reluctantly, he decided not to. Like it or not, such petty tricks gave him little pleasure anymore. The ghost of Cedric Diggory, who Snape had come to recognize before anyone else, closed the door behind the boys and shot the bolt.

“Thank you, Mr. Diggory,” Snape said quietly, amidst the snores of the other paintings. “Feel free to accompany them back to their dormitories. Or not. I don’t much care.”

Cedric nodded to Snape. Snape knew the ghost didn’t like to talk to him. Something about a ghost talking to a painting seemed to disturb the boy. Nothing technically human on either end, Snape figured. Cedric dismissed himself and walked through the locked wooden door.

One of the paintings near Snape stopped snoring.

“He isn’t precisely like his father, is he?” a thoughtful, older voice said.

Snape settled back into his portrait. “He’s only like him in the worst of ways. He’s a Potter.”

“Now who’s passing easy judgments?” the other voice said with a hint of teasing.

“It’s not an easy judgment. I’ve watched him. He’s as arrogant and foolish as the others that bore his last name. Don’t pretend you don’t see it.”

“I see that he came to ask for your help.”

Snape nodded grudgingly. “One can only hope that that instinct has a chance to mature. He asked for help only when he ran out of other options. And he didn’t, you’ll notice, actually take any of my advice.”

The older voice was silent for a moment, and then asked, “Will you tell Minerva?”

“Perhaps,” Snape said, considering. “Perhaps not. For now, I will do as I’ve done all along. I will watch.”

“You believe there is a chance he and his friends might succeed, then?”

Snape didn't answer. A minute later, the older voice spoke again. "He is being manipulated. He doesn't know it."

Snape nodded. "I assumed there was no point in telling him."

"You're probably right, Severus. You have an instinct for such things."

Snape replied pointedly, "I learned when *not* to talk from the master, Albus."

"Indeed you did, Severus. Indeed you did."