



6. HARRY'S MIDNIGHT MEETING

James hurried back to the Gryffindor common room after classes, shrugging out of his school robes as he ran up the steps. He changed into a jacket and an evening cloak, matted his hair down with water from the basin, frowned critically at himself in the mirror, and then ran back down the steps two at a time to meet his dad.

Harry was waiting with Neville by the portrait of Sir Cadogan.

"A spirited tussle it was," Cadogan was saying, leaning nonchalantly against the frame of his painting and waving his sword illustratively. He was talking to Neville, who looked extremely uncomfortable. "I saw the whole thing of course. Took place right there. Bollox Humphreys was his name, and he fought like a man possessed. Lost, of course, but noble as a thousand kings. Spilt most of his innards right where you're standing and still swung his sword with more strength than a mountain troll. Gallant man. Gallant!"

“Ah, James, here we are,” Neville said loudly as James approached. Harry and Sir Cadogan looked up. Harry smiled, looking his son up and down.

“Your mum will be glad to know you’re putting that cloak to use.”

“To be honest, this is the first I’ve had it out of the trunk,” James admitted, grinning sheepishly.

Harry nodded, “And it’ll go right back into the trunk after tonight, won’t it?”

“Guaranteed.”

“Good man,” Harry acknowledged. James fell into step next to his dad as they headed toward a staircase.

“Wait!” Cadogan cried, sheathing his sword and jumping into the center of his frame. “Have I ever told you about the battle of the Red Mages? Bloodiest massacre these walls have ever seen! Happened just at the foot of those stairs! Next time, then. Courage!”

“Who’s that?” James asked, looking back over his shoulder.

“You’ll get to know him.” Neville said. “Enjoy your ignorance while you can.”

As they walked, James listened as his dad told Neville about the current happenings at the Ministry. There had been an arrest of several individuals involved in a counterfeit Portkey operation. More trolls were being seen in the foothills, and the Ministry was stepping up patrols to keep the troublesome idiots from venturing into Muggle territories. The new Minister, Loquacious Knapp, was preparing to give a speech on expanded trade with Asian wizarding communities, including lifting the ban on flying carpets and something called “shades”.

“In other words,” Harry said, sighing. “Things are more or less the way they always are. Little breakouts here and there, small conspiracies and squabbles. Politics and paperwork.”

“What you mean,” Neville said, smiling crookedly, “is that peace can be a pretty boring thing for an auror.”

Harry grinned. “I guess you’re right. I should be thankful my job isn’t any more interesting, shouldn’t I? At least I get to spend most nights at home with Ginny, Lil and Albus.” He glanced down at James, “And take on an ambassador’s assignment that just happens to afford me the chance to see my boy during his first week at Hogwarts.”

“I understnd he’s only been to McGonagall’s office once so far,” Neville commented mildly.

“Oh?” Harry said, still eyeing James, “And what for?”

Neville raised his eyebrows at James as if to say *you have the floor*.

“I, er, broke a window.”

Harry’s smile hardened a bit around the edges. “I look forward to the story of how that happened.” he said thoughtfully. James felt his dad’s stare like it was a set of tiny weights.

They reached a double doorway with both doors thrown wide open. Delicious smells wafted down the hall.

“Here we are,” Neville said, standing aside to allow Harry and James to enter first. “The Americans’ quarters during their stay. We’ve given them most of the southwest turret. Had it temporarily refitted with a recreational area, common room, kitchen and staff to suit their needs.”

“Sounds nice,” Harry said, examining the space. The common room was, in fact, rather small, with circular walls, high, rough-beamed ceilings, a cramped stone fireplace and only two very tall, narrow windows. The Americans had, however, been very busy. There were bearskin rugs on the floors and tall, vibrantly colored tapestries hung on the walls, positioned over the stone staircase that spiraled the room. A three-story bookcase was crammed with gigantic volumes, most accessible only via a very rickety-looking wheeled ladder. The most amazing detail, however, was a mind-bogglingly complex armature of brass gears, joints and mirrored lenses that hung from the ceiling, filling the upper chamber of the room and moving very slowly. James stared up into it, delighted and amazed. It made a very faint squeaking and clicking as it moved.

“You’ve discovered my Daylight Savings Device, my boy.” Ben Franklyn said, coming from a large arched doorway beneath the spiral staircase. “One of my absolute necessities whenever I travel for long periods, despite the fact that it’s a veritable bear to pack, and the calibrations when I set it up again are simply dreadful.”

“It’s wonderful,” Neville said, also staring up into the slowly ratcheting network of mirrors and wheels. “What does it do?”

“Let me demonstrate.” Franklyn said eagerly. “It works best in full daylight, of course, but even the stars and moon of a bright night can provide adequate light. An evening such as this should prove most satisfactory. Let me see...”

He moved to a battered high-backed leather chair, settled himself into it carefully, and then consulted a chart on the wall. “Third of September, yes. Moon is in the fourth house, it is, let me see... approximately a quarter past seven. Jupiter is approaching the final leg of... mm-hmm...”

As Franklyn muttered, he produced his wand and began pointing it at bits of the Device. Gears began to spin as parts of the Device whirled to life. Bits of the armature unfolded as other bits pivoted, making room. Mirrors began to slide, positioning behind cycling groups of lenses, which magnified them. Ratchets clicked and shuttled. The entire device seemed to dance slowly within itself as Franklyn directed it with his wand, apparently making calculations in his head as he went. And as it moved, something began to form within it. Ghostly beams of rose colored light began to appear between the mirrors, pencil thin, turning

motes of dust into tiny specks of fire. There were dozens of the beams, brightening, swiveling into place, and eventually forming a complicated geometric tracery. And then, in the center of the tracery, shapes shimmered into place. James turned on the spot, watching raptly as tiny planets coalesced, formed out of colored light. They spun and orbited, tracing faint arcs behind them. Two larger shapes condensed in the very center, and James recognized them as the sun and the moon. The sun was a ball of rose light, its corona spreading several feet around it. The moon, smaller but more solid, was like a silver quaffle, equally divided between its light and dark sides, turning slowly. The entire constellation weaved and turned majestically, dramatically lighting the brass Device and spilling delightful patterns of light over the entire room.

“Nothing so healthy as natural light,” Franklyn said. “Captured here, through the windows, and then condensed within a carefully calibrated network of mirrors and lenses, as you can see. The light is filtered with my own optical spell-work for clarity. The final result is, well, what you see here. Excellent for the eyesight, the blood, and one’s health overall, obviously.”

“This is the secret to your longevity?” Harry asked, rather breathlessly.

“Oh, certainly this is a small part of it,” Franklyn said dismissively. “Mostly, I just prefer it to read by at night. Certainly it’s more fun than a torch.” He caught James eye and winked.

Professor Jackson appeared in the archway. James saw him glance from Franklyn to the light display overhead, a look of tired disdain on his face. “Dinner, I am told, is served. Shall we adjourn to the dining room or shall I have it brought in here?”

Along with Harry, James, Neville, and the representatives from the Ministry, most of the Hogwarts teaching staff was present, including Professor Curry. To James’s consternation, Curry told Harry all about James’s skills on the football field, assuring him that she would work to see that said skills were developed to their fullest extent.

Contrary to his dad’s suspicion, the meal was remarkably diverse and enjoyable. Madame Delacroix’s gumbo was the first course. She carried it to the table herself, somehow not spilling a drop despite her blindness. Even more curiously, she directed the ladle with her wand, a gnarled and evil-looking length of graperoot, dishing a portion into each bowl at the table while she stared at the ceiling and hummed rather disconcertingly. The gumbo was indeed spicy, thick with chunks of shrimp and sausage, but James liked it. Next came fresh rolls and several varieties of butter, including a brown and sticky goo that Jackson identified as apple butter. James tasted it carefully on a hunk of bread, and then spread a gigantic dollop on the remainder of his roll.

The main course was rack of lamb with mint jelly. James didn’t consider this typically American food, and commented as much.

“There’s no such thing as American food, James.” Jackson said. “Our cuisine, like our people, is simply the sum total of the various world cultures we come from.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Franklyn interjected. “I am pretty sure we can lay undisputed claim to the spicy buffalo wing.”

“Will we be having those tonight?” James asked hopefully.

“My apologies,” Franklyn said. “It is rather difficult to collect the ingredients for such things unless you possess Madame Delacroix’s unique voodoo capabilities.”

“Is that so?” Neville inquired, helping himself to more mint jelly. “And what abilities are those, Madame?”

Madame Delacroix composed herself, having given Professor Franklyn a wilting, albeit blind glare. “De old man, he don’t know what he speaks of. I just know about de sources he not as familiar with, bein’ more int’rested in his machines and gizmos.”

Franklyn’s smile, for the first time, seemed icy. “Madame Delacroix is being modest. She is, you may already know, one of our country’s foremost experts on remote physio-apparation. Do you know what that is, James?”

James didn’t have the slightest idea, and yet something about the milky gaze of Madame Delacroix made him reluctant to say so. Franklyn was watching him earnestly, expecting a response. Finally, James shook his head. Before Franklyn could explain, however, Harry spoke up.

“It just means that the Madame has, let’s say, different means of getting around.”

“‘Different means’ is one way to put it,” Franklyn chuckled. James felt uneasy, hearing that chuckle. There was something nasty in it. He noticed that Franklyn was emptying what was likely his third glass of wine. “Think about it, James. Remote physio-apparation. Can you factor it out? It means that poor old blind Madame Delacroix can project herself, send a version of herself out into the wide world, collect things, and even bring them back. And the beauty of it is, the version of herself she can project isn’t poor, or old, *or* blind. Isn’t that right, Madame?”

Delacroix stared blindly at a spot just over Franklyn’s shoulder, her face a grim mask of anger. Then she smiled, and as James had seen on the day of the Americans’ arrival, the smile transformed her face. “Oh, deah Professah Franklyn, you do tell such tales.” she said, and her strange bayou accent seemed even thicker than usual. “My skills were never as grand as ye speak of, and they’re far less now that I’m de old woman ye see before ye. If I could project such a sight, I hardly think I’d ever let anyone see me as I really am.”

The tension in the room broke and there was laughter. Franklyn smiled a bit tightly, but let the moment pass.

After dessert, Harry, James and the rest of the Hogwartians retired to the common room again, where Franklyn’s Daylight Savings Device had reproduced a condensed and shimmering version of the Milky Way. It lit the room with a silvery glow that James thought he could very nearly feel on his skin. Jackson offered

the adults an after dinner cocktail in tiny glasses. Neville barely touched his. Both Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant sampled tiny sips and gave forced, rather strained smiles. Harry, after holding it up to the light to look through the amber liquid, downed his in one gulp. He squinted and shook his head, then looked inquiringly at Jackson, unable to speak.

“Just a little of Tennessee’s finest, with a little wizard afterburn thrown in,” Jackson explained.

Finally, Harry thanked the Americans and bid them goodnight.

Retracing their steps through the darkened corridors, Harry walked with his hand on James’ shoulder.

“Want to stay with me in the guest quarters, James?” he asked. “I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to see much of you after tonight. I’ll be busy all day tomorrow, meeting with the Americans, keeping our friends from the Department of Ambassadorial Relations from making ‘an international incident’ of themselves, then I’m off home again. What do you say?”

“Sure!” James agreed instantly. “Where are your quarters?”

Harry smiled. “Watch this,” he said quietly, stopping in the middle of the hall. He turned around and paced idly, looking thoughtfully up at the dim ceiling. “I need... a really cool room with a couple of beds for me and my boy to sleep in tonight.”

James stared at his dad quizzically. Several seconds went by as Harry continued to pace back and forth. He seemed to be waiting for something. James was about to ask him what he was up to, when he heard a sudden noise. A low grind and rumble came from the wall behind him. James turned around just in time to see the stonework alter and shift, reforming itself around a huge door that hadn’t been there a moment before. Harry glanced down at his son, smiled knowingly, then reached and opened the door.

Inside was a large apartment, complete with a set of draped bunk beds, framed Gryffindor posters on the walls, a wardrobe containing Harry’s trunk and James’s school robes, and a fully equipped washroom. James stood inside the door, opening and closing his mouth, speechless.

“The Room of Requirement.” Harry explained, plopping onto a low, overstuffed chair. “I can’t believe I never told you about it.”

James got ready for bed, but his dad simply changed into a pair of jeans and a sweater and freshened up in the basin.

“I need to go out for a little while,” he told James. “After dinner tonight, Professor Franklyn asked me to meet him privately. He wanted some time to discuss a few things outside of tomorrow’s official meetings.” There was something about the way Harry said this that told James his dad preferred a private chat over an official meeting anyway. “I shouldn’t be too long, and I’ll be just down the hall, in the Americans’ quarters. Breakfast tomorrow, you and me?”

James nodded happily. He still hadn't brought himself to tell his dad about his abysmal failure on the Quidditch pitch, and he was happy to put it off as long as possible.

When Harry was gone, James lay in the top bunk, thinking about the events of the night. He remembered the sudden nastiness of Franklyn, which had surprised him. It was almost as great a change in character as the change that came over the voodoo queen, Madame Delacroix, when she smiled. Thinking of Madame Delacroix reminded James of the way she'd spooned the gumbo, unseeingly, operating the ladle with her creepy black wand, never spilling a drop.

James realized he was simply too excited to sleep. He slid off the top bunk and prowled the room restlessly. His dad's trunk sat open in the bottom of the wardrobe. James looked into it idly, then stopped and looked closer. He knew what it was when he saw it, but was surprised his dad would have brought it along. What use would he have for it here? James considered it. Finally, he reached into the trunk and withdrew his dad's invisibility cloak, unfolding its smooth, heavy length as it came.

How many times had the young Harry Potter explored the grounds of Hogwarts safely hidden away under this cloak? James had heard enough tales, from both his dad, uncle Ron and aunt Hermione, to know that this was an opportunity not to be missed. But where to go?

James thought for a moment, and then smiled a long, mischievous smile. He slipped the cloak over his head, just the way he used to on the rare occasions when Harry would let him play with it. James vanished. A moment later, the door of the Room of Requirement seemed to open all by itself, rocking slowly on its huge hinges. After a pause, it shut again, carefully and silently.

Tiptoeing, James headed for the quarters of the representatives of Alma Aleron.



James had only gotten half way down the corridor when there was a flicker of motion. Mrs. Norris, Filch's awful cat, had darted across the passage that intersected the corridor twenty feet ahead. James stopped,

his breath caught in his chest. “Shouldn’t you be dead by now, you ratty old carpet sample?” he whispered to himself, cursing his luck. Then, worse, Filch’s voice came echoing down the passage.

“That’s it dearest,” he said in a sing-song voice. “Don’t let the little buggers escape. Teach them a lesson that will have their little mousey kin shivering with fear.” Filch’s shadow leaked across the floor of the intersection, weaving as he approached.

James knew he was invisible, but he couldn’t help feeling that he should hunker up against the wall. He sidled into a narrow space between a doorway and a suit of armor, trying to keep his breathing shallow and silent. He peered around the elbow of the suit of armor.

Filch stepped into the intersection, his gait rather unsteady. “Find a hidey hole, did they, precious?” he asked the unseen Mrs. Norris. He reached into his coat and produced a silver flask. He took a swig, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and then spun the cap back on. “There they are, coming this way again, my dear. Come, come.”

Two mice scurried into the intersection, looping and dodging as they approached Filch’s feet. Mrs. Norris pounced, batting at them, but the mice scampered away, darting along the wall toward where James was hiding. Mrs. Norris followed, growling. To James’ great chagrin, the mice scampered behind the suit of armor and wriggled under the edge of the invisibility cloak. Their cold little feet scurried over James’ bare toes, then they stopped between his feet, sniffing the air as if sensing a hiding place. James tried to push them out from under the cloak with his toes, but they refused to go.

Mrs. Norris padded down the corridor intently, her whiskers twitching. She hunkered along the front of the suit of armor’s base, one paw outstretched, then pounced around it, stopping inches from the edge of the invisibility cloak. She looked around, her eyes flashing, sensing the mice were nearby, but not seeing them.

“Don’t tell me those dumb animals have bested you, my dear.” Filch said, scuffling down the corridor toward them.

James watched Mrs. Norris. She had encountered the invisibility cloak before, years earlier. James knew the stories, having been told them by both aunt Hermione and uncle Ron. Maybe she remembered the smell of it. Or maybe she was sensing James himself, his heat or scent or the beat of his heart. She raised her eyes, narrowing them, as if she knew he was there and was trying very hard to see him.

“Don’t be a sore loser, my dear Mrs. Norris.” Filch said, coming closer still. He was almost near enough that if he reached out he might inadvertently touch James. “If they got away, they’ll just tell their rodent friends about you. It’s a victory either way you slice it.”

Mrs. Norris inched closer. The mice between James’ feet were getting nervous. They tried to hide under each other, scooting further back between James’ feet. Mrs. Norris raised a paw. To James’ horror, she brushed the edge of the invisibility cloak with it. She hissed.

The mice, hearing the hiss, panicked. They scampered out from under the cloak, darting right between Mrs. Norris' feet. She jumped at the sight of them, ducking to watch them scurry away into the corridor. Filch laughed raspily.

"They put the spook on you, precious! I'd never have expected it. There they go! After them, now!"

But Mrs. Norris half turned back toward James, her baleful orange eyes narrowed, her slit pupils flared wide. She raised her paw again.

"Go, Mrs. Norris, go!" Filch said, his mood swinging to annoyance. He shoved her with his foot, scooching her away from James and toward the mice, which had disappeared further along the corridor. Filch's foot caught the edge of the cloak, pulling it away from James' feet. He felt cool air on his toes.

Mrs. Norris looked back toward James and hissed again. Filch, however, was too sodden to take heed. "They went that way, you blind old thing. I'd have never guessed a pair of dumb animals would get the jump on you. Let's go, let's go. There're always more near the kitchens." He ambled on into the shadows of the corridor and eventually Mrs. Norris followed, throwing occasional rankled glances back towards James.

When they turned the corner, he exhaled shakily, composed himself, then continued down the corridor, running lightly and feeling extremely lucky.

When he reached the door to the Americans' quarters it was closed and bolted. In the darkness, James could hear the voices of his dad and Franklyn inside, but they were muffled and unintelligible. He was about to give up and head downstairs, thinking he might perhaps find Cedric's ghost again, or even the Muggle intruder, when the voices inside the door grew louder. The bolt socked back and James scrambled out of the way, forgetting for a moment that he was hidden under the cloak. He pressed himself against the wall on the opposite side of the corridor just as the door creaked open. Franklyn emerged first, talking quietly. Harry followed, closing the door with the practiced stealth of any good auror. *Practice being quiet when you don't need to, Harry had told his son on many occasions, and you won't need to think about it when you do.*

"I find it's safer to move around during a private conversation," Franklyn was saying. "Even our own quarters are subject to eavesdropping by those whose philosophies differ from my own. At least this way no unwanted ears can hear the entirety of our dialogue."

"Funny thing," Harry said. "I spent so much time sneaking around these halls and corridors when I was a student that even as an adult it's difficult to avoid the instinct to skulk and sneak, for fear that I might get caught and be given detention."

The two men began to walk slowly, apparently meandering in no particular direction. James followed at a safe distance, taking care not to breathe too heavily or stumble against any of the statues or suits

of armor that lined the walls. “Things haven’t changed much, you know,” Franklyn said. “Now, however, we have worse things than detention to worry about.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, and James could hear the wry smile in his voice. “I had some pretty horrible detentions.”

“Mm,” Franklyn murmured noncommittally. “The history of both our schools has involved some unsavory characters and unnecessary ugliness. Your Miss Umbridge, our Professor Magnussen. Your Voldemort, our... well, honestly, we have no one in our history that compares to him. Indeed, he was a terrible threat to all of us while he lived. Our duty is to ensure that such things don’t happen again.”

“Am I to assume that this meeting, then, is an opportunity to compare notes about such threats? Off the record, so to speak?” Harry asked seriously.

Franklyn sighed. “One can never have too many friends or too many sources, Mr. Potter. I am not an auror, and I do not have any official authority or policing jurisdiction even in my own country. I am just an old teacher. Old teachers, however, are often underestimated, as you certainly know. Old teachers see quite a lot.”

“You have your own version of the Progressive Element at Alma Aleron?”

“Oh, it’s beyond that, unfortunately. For most of the students and even the staff, the facts of Voldemort and his Death Eaters are up for conjecture. It’s incredible how short a time must pass before a certain kind of mentality feels it is safe to turn history onto its head.”

“The Progressive Element here knows they need to be very careful,” Harry said in a low voice. “Enough people are still alive who have first-hand memories of Voldemort and his atrocities. Enough people still remember lost family and friends, killed at the hand of his Death Eaters. Still, the lure to challenge the status quo, whatever it may be, is strong in the young. It’s natural, but typically short lived. History will out, as they say.”

“History is bunk,” Franklyn said disgustedly. “I should know. I lived during quite a bit of it, and I can indeed tell you that sometimes there is, in fact, a wide gulf between what gets reported and what actually happened.”

“I would expect that that is the exception and not the rule.” Harry stated.

Franklyn sighed as they turned a corner. “I suppose. The fact is, though, that the exceptions give rabble-rousers like the Progressive Element all the ammunition they need to challenge any historical record they wish. The history of Voldemort and his rise to power, as we know it, doesn’t fit their agenda. Thus, they carefully attack it, sowing the seeds of doubt among minds shallow enough to believe the distortions.”

“It sounds,” Harry said, keeping his voice low and conversational. “like you have a pretty good idea what their agenda is.”

“Of course I do, and so do you, Mr. Potter. The agenda hasn’t changed for a thousand years, has it?”

“No, it hasn’t.”

“Harry Potter,” Franklyn stopped in the darkness of the corridor, looking at Harry’s face. “Even now, a sizeable minority in my country believe that Lord Tom Riddle, as they prefer to call him, has been unfairly demonized by you who defeated him. They prefer to believe that Voldemort was a revolutionary hero, a fresh thinker, whose beliefs were simply too much for the traditional ruling class to tolerate. They think he was destroyed because he threatened to make things better, not worse, but that the wealthy and powerful were resistant even to a change for the good.”

James, standing several feet away, hidden under the cloak, could see his dad’s jaw clenching as Franklyn spoke. But when Harry responded, his voice remained calm and measured.

“You know that these are lies and distortions, I assume.”

“Of course I do.” Franklyn said, waving a hand dismissively, almost angrily. “But the point is that they are *attractive* lies to a certain type of person. Those that preach these distortions know how to appeal to the emotions of the populace. They believe the truth is a wire to bend to their will. It is their agenda only that they care for.”

Harry remained stoic and unmoving. “And the agenda, you believe, is the domination of the Muggle world?”

Franklyn laughed rather harshly, and James thought of the nasty chuckle the professor had made during dinner, when discussing Madame Delacroix’s powers. “Not to hear them tell it. No, they are crafty, these days. They claim to be for the exact opposite. Their rallying cry is absolute equality between the Muggle and magical worlds. Full disclosure, the abolition of all laws of secrecy and non-competition. They preach that anything less is unfair to the Muggles, an insult to them.”

Harry nodded grimly. “As we are seeing here. Of course, it is a two-edged sword. Prejudice and equality in the same message.”

“Certainly,” Franklyn agreed, resuming his walk along the corridor. “In America, we are seeing a resurgence of stories about Muggle scientists capturing witches and wizards, torturing them to discover the secret of their magic.”

“A throwback to the old Salem witch trials?” Harry asked.

Franklyn laughed, and this time there was no malice in it. “Hardly. Those were the good old days. Sure, witches were put on trial, and loads of them were burned, but as you know, any witch worth her wand wouldn’t be hurt by a Muggle bonfire. She’d stand in the flames and yell for a while, just to give the Muggles a good show, then transport herself from the pyre flames to her own fireplace. That was the origin of the floo network, of course. No, these days, the stories of witches and wizards being captured and systematically

tortured are pure fabrications. That doesn't matter to the faithful, though. The culture of fear and prejudice works side-by-side with their mission of 'equality'. Full disclosure, they claim, will bring peace and freedom. Continuing the program of secrecy, on the other hand, can only lead to more attacks on wizarding society by an increasingly invasive Muggle world."

Harry stopped by a window. "And once they've achieved their goal of total disclosure with the Muggle world?"

"Well, there's only one outcome to that, isn't there?" Franklyn answered.

Harry's face was thoughtful in the moonlight. "Muggles and wizards would descend into competitions and jealousies, just like they did in eons past. The dark wizards would make sure of it. It would start as small challenges and outbursts. Laws would be passed, enforcing equal treatment, but those laws would become the basis for new contentions. Wizards would demand to be placed into Muggle power structures, all in the name of 'equality'. Once there, they'd push for greater control, more power. They'd win over Muggle leaders, using promises and lies where they could, threats and the imperious curse where they couldn't. Eventually, order would break down. Finally, inevitably, there would be all-out war." Harry's voice had gone soft, considering. He turned to Franklyn, who stood watching him, his face calm but dreadful. "And that's what they want, isn't it? War with the Muggle world."

"That's what they've always wanted," Franklyn agreed. "The struggle never stops. It just has different chapters."

"Who's involved?" Harry asked simply.

Franklyn sighed again, hugely, and rubbed his eyes. "It's not so simple. It's virtually impossible to tell the instigators from their followers. There are some individuals it would be instructive to watch closely, though."

"Madame Delacroix."

Franklyn glanced up, studying Harry's face. He nodded. "And Professor Jackson."

James gasped, and then clapped his hand over his mouth. His dad and Professor Franklyn stood very still. James was sure they'd heard him. Then, Harry spoke again.

"Anyone else?"

Franklyn shook his head slowly. "Of course. But then you'd just be watching everyone and everything. It's like an infestation of cockroaches in the walls. You can either watch the cracks, or burn down the house. Take your pick."

James backed away very carefully, then, when he felt safely out of earshot, he turned and retraced his steps back to the Americans' quarters. His heart was pounding so heavily he had been sure that his dad or Professor Franklyn would hear it.

He knew the so-called Progressive Element was no good, but now he knew it must be them that were planning the return of Merlinus Ambrosius, believing he would help them to accomplish their false goal of equality, which would lead inevitably to war. Merlin had said that he would return when the balance between Muggles and wizards was "ripe for his ministrations". What else could that mean? He hadn't been surprised that Madame Delacroix might be involved in such a plot. But Professor Jackson? James had come to quite like the professor, despite his crusty exterior. He could hardly imagine that Jackson could be secretly plotting the domination of the Muggle world. Franklyn had to be wrong about him.

James ran lightly past the Americans' quarters, looking for the door to the guest room he and his dad were staying in. With a sudden stab of fear, he remembered that the doorway had vanished when he'd come out. It was a magical room, after all. How was he supposed to get back in? He had to be inside the room, apparently asleep, by the time his dad came back. He stopped in the corridor, not even sure what stretch of wall the doorway had appeared in. He glanced around hopelessly, unable to keep himself from looking for some subtle clue or hint of where the doorway was hidden. What had his dad called it? The Room of Requirement? James had remembered his wand this time. He pulled it out and shook his hand out from under the cloak, revealing it.

"Uh," he began, whispering harshly and pointing his wand at the wall. "Room of Requirement... open?"

Nothing happened, of course. And then James heard a noise. His senses had grown almost painfully sharp as his body shot full of adrenaline. He listened, his eyes wide. Voices. Franklyn and his dad were coming back already. They must have begun their return journey at almost exactly the same time as James, but a little slower. He heard them talking in hushed voices, probably as they stood by the door into Franklyn's rooms. His dad would be returning in mere moments.

James thought furiously. What had his dad done to open the room? He had just stood there, hadn't he, waiting, and then bang, there was the door? No, James recalled, he had spoken first. And paced a bit. James replayed the evening in his memory, trying to remember what his dad had said, but he was too flustered.

Light bloomed at the end of the corridor. Footsteps approached. James looked down the corridor frantically. His dad was approaching, wand lit but held low, his head down. James remembered that he had his own wand held out, his arm outside the cloak. He yanked it in as quickly and silently as he could, arranging the cloak to cover him completely. It was hopeless. His dad would enter the room and see that James wasn't there. Maybe James could follow him in and claim to have been to his rooms to get a book he needed? He had never been any good at lying. Besides, he'd have the cloak with him. He almost groaned out loud.

Harry Potter stopped in the corridor. He held the wand up and looked at the wall. "I need to get into the room my son is sleeping in." he said conversationally. Nothing happened. Harry didn't seem surprised.

"Hmm." He said, apparently to himself. "I wonder why the door won't open. I suppose..." He looked around raising his eyebrows and smiling very slightly. "It's because my son isn't sleeping in the Room of Requirement at all, but is standing here in the corridor with me, under my invisibility cloak, trying as hard as he can to remember how in the world to open the door. Right James?"

James let out his breath and yanked the invisibility cloak off. "You knew all along, didn't you."

"I assumed it when I heard you gasp downstairs. I didn't know for sure until the trick with the door. Come on, let's get inside." Harry Potter chuckled tiredly. He paced three times and spoke the words that opened the Room of Requirement and they went in.

When they were both in their beds, James in the top bunk, staring up at the dark ceiling, Harry spoke.

"You don't have to follow in my footsteps, James. I hope you know that."

James worked his jaw, not ready to respond to that. He listened and waited.

"You were down there tonight, so you heard Professor Franklyn," Harry finally said. "There's one part of what he said that I want you to remember. There are always plots and revolutions in the works. The battle is always the same, just with different chapters. It isn't your job to save the world, son. Even if you do, it'll just go and get itself into danger again, and again, and again. It's the nature of things."

Harry paused and James heard him laugh quietly. "I know how it feels. I remember the great weight of responsibility and the heady thrill of believing I was the only one to stop the evil, to win the war, to battle for the ultimate good. But James, even then, that wasn't my duty alone. It was everyone's fight. Everyone's sacrifice. And there were those whose sacrifice was far greater than my own. It isn't one man's duty to save the world. And it certainly isn't the duty of one boy who can't even figure out how to open the Room of Requirement yet."

James heard movement from the bunk below. His dad stood, his head rising to look at James in the top bunk. In the darkness, James couldn't make out his expression, but he knew it nonetheless. His dad was smiling his crooked, knowing smile. His dad knew it all. His dad was Harry Potter.

"What do you think, son?"

James took a deep breath. He wanted to tell his dad about everything he'd seen and heard. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell him about the Muggle intruder, and Cedric Diggory's ghost, and the secret of Austramaddux, the plot to return Merlin and use him to start a final war with the Muggles. But in the end, he decided not to. He smiled at his dad.

“I know, Dad. Don’t worry about me. If I decide to save the world single-handedly, I’ll send you and Mum a note first. OK?”

Harry smirked and shook his head, not really buying it but knowing there was no point in pressing the point. He climbed back into the bottom bunk.

Five minutes later, James spoke up in the dark. “Hey Dad, any chance you might let me keep the invisibility cloak with me for the school year?”

“None at all, my boy. None at all.” Harry said sleepily. James heard him roll over. A few minutes later, both slept.



When James and Harry Potter entered the Great Hall the next morning, James sensed the mood of the room change. He was used to the reaction that the wizarding community showed whenever he was out with his dad, but this was different. Rather than turning to look at them, James sensed people looking pointedly in the other direction. Conversations quieted. There was the strange sensation of people glancing at them sideways, or turning to watch once James and Harry had passed them. James felt a surge of anger. Who were these people? Most of them were good witches and wizards, from hardworking parents who had always been supportive of Harry Potter, first as the Boy Who Lived, then as the young man who helped bring about the downfall of Voldemort, and finally as the man who was Head Auror. Now, just because some rabble-rousers had painted a few signs and spread around a few stupid rumors, they were afraid to look directly at him.

Even as James thought that, however, he saw that he was wrong. As Harry and James sat down at the end of the Gryffindor table (James had pleaded with his dad not to make him sit up at the teachers’ table on the dais), there were a few grins and hearty greetings. Ted saw Harry, whooped, and ran down the length of

table, giving Harry a complicated handshake that involved a lot of banging fists, hand grips and finally, an embrace that was one part hug and one part body slam.

Harry collapsed onto the bench, laughing. “Ted, you’re going to knock yourself clean out one of these times.”

“My Godfather, everybody.” Ted said, as if introducing Harry to the room at large. “Have you met Noah yet, Harry? He’s a Gremlin, like me and Petra.”

Harry shook Noah’s hand. “I think we met last year at the Quidditch championship, yes?”

“Sure,” Noah said. “That was the game where Ted scored the winning point for the opposing team. How could I forget?”

“Technically, it was an assist.” Ted said primly. “I happened to wallop their team’s quaffle-carrier through the goal on accident. I was aiming for the press box.”

“Hate to interrupt, but do you guys mind if James and I get a little breakfast?” Harry asked, gesturing toward the table.

“Have at it,” Ted replied magnanimously. “And if any of these malcontents give you any trouble, just let me know. It’s Quidditch tonight, and we hold grudges.” He eyed the room grimly, then grinned and sauntered away.

“I’d tell him not to sweat it, but that’d be taking away his fun, wouldn’t it?” Harry said, watching Ted depart. James grinned. They both began to fill their plates from the steaming platters along the table. As they began to eat, James was pleased to see Ralph and Zane enter. He waved them over enthusiastically.

“Hey dad, here’re my friends, Zane and Ralph.” James said as they piled onto the benches, one on either side. “Zane’s the blonde one, Ralph’s the brick house.”

“Pleased to meet you, Zane, Ralph.” Harry said. “James tells me good things about both of you.”

“I’ve read about you,” Ralph said, staring at Harry. “Did you really do all that stuff?”

Harry laughed. “Straight shooter, isn’t he?” he said, raising an eyebrow at James. “The major points, yes, those are probably true. Although if you’d’ve been there, it would have seemed a lot less heroic at the time. Mostly, me and my friends were just trying to keep ourselves from getting blasted, eaten or cursed.”

Zane seemed uncharacteristically quiet. “Hey, what’s the deal?” James said, nudging him. “You’re a little too new to all this to have an idol complex about the Great Harry Potter.”

Zane grimaced, and then pulled a copy of the *Daily Prophet* from his backpack. “This stinks,” he said, sighing and flopping the paper open onto the table. “But you’re gonna see it sooner or later.”

James leaned over and glanced at it. “Hogwarts Anti-Auror Demonstration Overshadows International Summit” the main headline read. Below it, in smaller type: “Potter Visit Sets Off School-wide Protest as Magical Community Re-evaluates Auror Policies”. James felt his cheeks flush red with anger. Before he could respond, however, his dad placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Hmm,” Harry said mildly. “That’s got Rita Skeeter’s name all over it.”

Zane frowned at Harry, then glanced at the paper again. “You can tell who wrote it just by the headline?”

“No,” Harry laughed, dismissing the newspaper and digging into a slice of French toast. “Her name’s on the by-line. Still, yeah, that is pretty much her typical brand of tripe. It hardly matters. The world will forget it by this time next week.”

James was reading the first paragraph, his brow furrowed furiously. “She says that most of the school was there, protesting and shouting. That’s complete rubbish! I saw it, and if there were more than a hundred people there, I’ll kiss a blast-ended skrewt! Besides, most of them were just there to see what was going on! There were only fifteen or twenty people with the signs and the slogans!”

Harry sighed. “It’s just a story, James. It isn’t supposed to be accurate, it’s supposed to sell papers.”

“But how can you let them say things like this? It’s dangerous! Professor Franklyn-“

The look Harry gave him stopped him from going any further. After a second, Harry’s expression softened. “I know what you are worried about, James, and I don’t blame you. But there are ways of handling these things, and one of those ways *isn’t* arguing with people like Rita Skeeter.”

“You sound like McGonagall.” James said, dropping his eyes and jabbing at a chunk of sausage.

“I should.” Harry replied quickly. “She taught me. And I think it’s Headmistress McGonagall to you.”

James poked at his plate sullenly for a moment. Then, not wanting to look at it anymore, he folded the newspaper roughly and stuck it out of sight.

“First Quidditch of the season tonight, then, right?” Harry asked, waving his fork at the three boys in general.

“Ravenclaw versus Gryffindor!” Zane announced. “My first game! I can hardly wait.”

James looked up and saw his dad grinning at Zane. “You made the Ravenclaw team, then! That’s very cool. If I can finish early enough, I plan on coming to the match. I look forward to seeing you fly. What position will you play?”

“Beater.” Zane said, pretending to swat a bludger with his fork.

“He’s pretty good, Mr. Potter,” Ralph said earnestly. “I saw him fly his first time. He just about made a crater in the middle of the pitch, but he pulled up at the last second.”

“That takes some serious control,” Harry acknowledged, studying Zane. “You’ve had broom lessons?”

“Not a one!” Ralph cried, as if he were Zane’s public relations agent. “That’s the amazing bit, isn’t it?”

James looked at Ralph, his face grim, trying to catch his eye and warn him off the topic, but it was already too late.

“He probably wouldn’t have figured it out at all” Ralph said, “if he hadn’t taken off after James when he did the big outta-control-like-a-bottle-rocket-rumba-“ Ralph squirmed on the bench, mimicking James’ inaugural broom flight.

“But you’ll be supporting the Gryffindors, of course!” Zane interrupted suddenly, planting his palm on Ralph’s forehead and pushing him backwards.

Harry glanced around the table, chewing a chunk of toast, a quizzical look on his face. “Er, well, yes. Of course.” he admitted, still looking from boy to boy.

“Yeah, well, that’s cool. I understand completely.” Zane said quickly, waggling his eyebrows at Ralph who was sitting there looking nonplussed. “Be true to your school and all that. Whoo. Look at the time. Come on Ralphinator. Classes to get to.”

“I have a free period first,” Ralph protested. “And I haven’t had any breakfast yet.”

“Let’s go, ya lunk-head!” Zane insisted, coming around the table and hooking Ralph’s elbow. Zane could barely move Ralph, but Ralph allowed himself to be tugged along.

“What?” Ralph said loudly, frowning at the meaningful look Zane was giving him. “What’d I do? Did I say something I wasn’t-“ He stopped. His eyebrows shot up and he turned back to James, looking mortified. “Oh. Ah.” he said as Zane pulled him toward the door. As they rounded the corner, James heard Ralph say, “I’m just a big idiot, aren’t I?”

James sighed. “So yeah, I stink at Quidditch. I’m sorry.”

Harry studied his son. “Pretty bad, was it?”

James nodded. “I know.” he said, “It’s no big deal. It’s just Quidditch. There’s always next year. I don’t have to do it just because you did it. I know, I know. You don’t have to say it.”

Harry continued to stare at James, his jaw moving slightly, as if he was thinking. Finally he sat back and picked up his pumpkin juice. “Well, that’s a load off my chest, then. Sounds like you’ve done my job for me.”

James looked up at his dad. Harry looked back at him as he took a very long, slow, drink from his glass. He seemed to be smiling, and hiding his smile behind the glass. James tried not to laugh. This is serious, he told himself. This isn’t funny. This is Quidditch. On that thought, his composure cracked slightly. He smiled, and then tried to cover it with his hand, which only made it worse.

Harry lowered his glass and grinned, shaking his head slowly. “You’ve really been worried about this, haven’t you, James?”

James’ smile faltered again. He swallowed. “Yeah, Dad. Of course I have. I mean, it’s Quidditch. It’s your sport, and granddad’s too. I’m James Potter. I’m supposed to be excellent on a broom. Not a danger to myself and everybody around me.”

Harry leaned forward, putting his glass down and looking James in the eye. “And you may still be great on the broom, James. Merlin’s beard, son, it’s your first week and you’ve not even had your first broom lesson, have you? Back when I started here, we wouldn’t have even been allowed to get on a practice broom without lessons, much less try out for the House teams.”

“But even if you had,” James interrupted, “you’d have been excellent at it.”

“That’s not the point son. You are so worried about living up to the myth of who I was supposed to be that you aren’t giving yourself a chance to be even better. You’re defeating yourself before you even start. Don’t you see that? No one can compete with a legend. Even *I* wish I was half the wizard the stories make me out to be. Every day I look in the mirror and tell myself not to try so hard to be the Famous Harry Potter, but just to relax and let myself be your dad, and your mum’s husband, and the best auror I can be, which sometimes doesn’t seem to be all that great, to tell you the truth. You have to stop thinking of yourself as the son of Harry Potter...” Harry paused, seeing that James had really heard him, perhaps for the first time. He smiled a little again. “...and give me the chance to think of myself simply as James Potter’s dad, instead. Because of all the things I’ve done in my life, raising you, Albus, and Lily, are the three things I am proudest of. Got it?”

James smiled again, crookedly. He didn’t know it, but it was the same crooked smile he so often saw on his dad’s face. “All right, Dad. I’ll try that. But it’s hard.”

Harry nodded understandingly and sat back. After a moment, he said, “Am I always that predictable?”

James broke into a knowing grin. “Sure, Dad. You and Mum both. ‘You aren’t going outside wearing that, are you?’” Harry laughed out loud at James’ impression of Ginny. James went on. “It’s cold

in here, put on a sweater! Don't say that word in front of your grandmum! Stop playing with the garden gnomes or you'll get green thumbs!"

Harry was still laughing and wiping his eyes as they said goodbye, promising to meet that evening at the Quidditch match.

