



17. NIGHT OF THE RETURNING

To her credit, Madam Curio didn't let Professor Jackson's accusations influence her treatment of James. She examined the fracture for several minutes, poking and pinching, and then carefully splinted it. She fell into a harsh but pedantic diatribe about the woes of Quidditch injuries, but it sounded to James like something she'd said a hundred times before. Her mind was elsewhere, and James didn't need to guess what was preoccupying her. The invasion of Martin Prescott into the school had caused a wave of speculation and anxiety. His identity as a Muggle news reporter, and the fact that he was being kept in the Alma Aleron's quarters had fed a load of rumors. There was a cloud of unease over the entire school, not alleviated by the headmistress' announcement that Ministry officials were arriving to deal with Mr. Prescott. As Madam Curio measured the Skelegro dosage, James caught her glancing at him suspiciously, looking him up and down. *Somebody* had to have let the interloper in, after all. Why not this first-year son of the Head Auror? James knew that some people- those who believed the lies of the Progressive Element- would expect him to pull just such a stunt. Earlier that day, he'd heard a voice from a cluster of students saying, "It makes sense, doesn't it? The whole auror line is that the law of secrecy is our only protection from the supposed Muggle witch-hunters. So what do they do? They allow this guy to sneak in and scare us all into thinking Muggles are

hiding out in the forest, behind every bush with a torch and a pyre, ready to burn us all at the stake. It's preposterous. I say let him do his story. That'll show those Ministry power-mongers what for."

"There," Madam Curio said, straightening. "All finished. You'll feel some tingling and itching overnight as the bone knits. That's perfectly normal. Don't fiddle with the splint. The last thing you'll want is for the bones to knit crookedly. The only fix for that would be for me to re-break the bone and start all over, and we certainly wouldn't want that. Now," She gestured towards the row of beds. "Pick whichever you like. I'll see that breakfast is brought to you here in the morning. You may as well make yourself comfortable."

James slung his backpack onto one of the bedside tables and climbed up onto the unusually high bed. It was a very comfortable bed, and for good reason, since all the mattresses in the hospital wing had been infused with relaxation hexes. The hexes, however, had no effect on James' thoughts, which were dark with frustration and anxiety. Professor Jackson had admitted that tonight was a night of ultimate importance. It wasn't simply speculation anymore. And now here James was, stuck for the night in the hospital wing, neatly trapped by Professor Jackson's crafty interpretation of Headmistress McGonagall's instructions. Alone for the first time since the attempted broomstick caper, James felt the full impact of what had happened out on the Quidditch pitch. It had seemed like a crazy plan from the beginning, but no more so than the plan to capture Professor Jackson's briefcase, and *that* had worked, hadn't it? Everything had been a success so far, until now. It was as if an invisible brick wall had suddenly blocked them, halting their progress at the last, ultimate moment. Arguably, the Merlin staff was the most powerful element of the three relics. Even now, Corsica, Jackson and Delacroix were probably preparing to bring the relics together, unaware that they were missing the robe, but with the two most important relics in their possession.

In spite of his anxieties, James had begun to drift sleepily under the influence of the hexed mattress. Now, he sat up, his heart beating hard in his chest. What would happen when Jackson opened his case and found Ralph's dress robes instead of the relic robe of Merlin? The visum-ineptio charm would break then, wouldn't it? Jackson would see the case for what it was. He'd recognize it, and remember that day in Technomancy class, when James, Ralph and Zane had used the fake case to trick him. He had thought they'd failed, had even referred to it while taking James to the hospital wing. He would surely realize then that they *hadn't* failed. Jackson was smart. He'd know which of the boys had the real robe. Not Zane or Ralph, but James. The boy he hadn't "pegged" yet. Would Jackson come to the hospital wing to demand the robe? No, even as James thought it, he knew Jackson wouldn't. He'd go straight to James' trunk in the Gryffindor boy's quarters. He'd probably claim to be searching for clues about James' involvement in the unnamed dangerous plot against Hogwarts. Jackson would surely get James' trunk open, and then he'd retrieve the robe. Everything James, Ralph and Zane, and even the Gremlins had risked would be in vain. It would indeed be over, and there was nothing James could do about it.

James struck the bedside table with his fist in frustration. Madam Curio, seated at her desk in the corner, gasped and put a hand over her chest. She looked at James but didn't say anything. James pretended not to see her.

His backpack had slipped sideways when he'd slammed his fist onto the table. Resolutely, he grabbed it and opened it. He took out his parchments and his ink and quill. He knew that, under normal conditions, Madame Curio would never allow a patient to have an open ink bottle on her clean white sheets, but as far as she was concerned, she was harboring a potentially dangerous individual. Best not to provoke him. James bent over the parchment and wrote quickly, awkwardly, with his splinted arm, not even noticing the way his hand smeared the inky wet letters.

Dear Dad,

I'm sorry I took the M. Map and the I. Cloak. I know I shouldn't have, but I needed them, and I thought it was what you would have done, so I hope you aren't too mad. I know I don't stand a chance with Mum, but put in a good word, will you?

The reason I took them is because I've discovered something really sneaky and scary going on here at school. Some of the American teachers are in on it, though not Franklyn. He's cool. Also, the P.E. here is in on it. I don't want to tell you about it in a letter, but even if I am in big trouble with you and Mum, I need you to come. Can you be here tomorrow? Miss Sacarbina says you are on an important job and not to be interrupted, so maybe you can't, but try, OK? It's really important and I need your help.

Love,

James

James folded the parchment and tied it with a bit of twine. He didn't know how he'd send it, but he felt better just having written it. He remembered now that he'd intended to write his dad about the Merlin plot way back when they'd captured the robe, and he berated himself for not doing it then. He'd thought, at the time, that his reasons for not telling his dad were good ones, but now, trapped in the hospital wing on the ultimate night of the Merlin plot, and knowing that, despite everything, Jackson might very possibly capture the relic robe back from him, it seemed foolish and arrogant that he hadn't written his dad about it earlier.

An idea struck James and he dug in his backpack again. A moment later, he held his Weasley brand rubber duck in his hands. It still had Zane's handwriting on the bottom: *Laundry Room!* James dipped his quill and drew a line through that, then, underneath it, he wrote: *hospital wing: send Nobby to the east window.* When he was finished, he gave the duck a sharp squeeze. "Manky barmpot!" it quacked.

In the corner, Madam Curio once again startled and looked accusingly at James. Potential criminal or not, she clearly thought his behaviour unaccountably rude.

“Sorry, Madam,” James said, holding up the rubber duck. “It wasn’t me. It was my duck.”

“I see,” she said with obvious disapproval. “Perhaps now would be a good time for me to retire for the evening. You won’t be, er, needing anything, will you?”

James shook his head. “No, Madam. Thanks. My arm feels loads better, anyway.”

“Don’t fiddle with it, like I said, and you’ll be fine by morning, I expect.” She stood and hurried past James toward the leaded-glass doors. Two figures could be seen through the milky glass, and James knew that they were Philia Goyle and Kevin Murdock, both kindly sent by Professor Jackson to watch the doors. Madam Curio unlocked the doors and went out, offering her good-evenings to the sentries. The door clicked shut behind her and James heard the bolt clack into place. He sighed in frustration, and then jumped as his rubber duck quacked a loud insult next to him. He raised it and looked at the bottom. Below his handwriting was a new line of black letters: *open the window: ten minutes.*

James felt a little better. He hadn’t been sure that either Ralph or Zane would be in any position to hear or respond to their ducks. In fact, he’d had no word whatsoever about what had happened to the rest of the Gremlins. He felt cautiously confident that none had been caught, although Ralph’s predicament, left in the middle of the Slytherin holding pens, was probably worse than anyone else’s. Despite that, he figured that even Ralph had gotten out all right. Once everyone had seen James explode out of the holding pen riding Tabitha’s broom, attention had probably focused on his wild ride, and then Tabitha’s summoning of her broomstick, bringing both it and James back to the pitch. Most likely, Ralph had slipped out at that point and returned to the shed, along with the Gremlins.

James watched the clock over Madam Curio’s desk as the minutes ticked away. He struggled with the impulse to go and open the window before the ten minutes had passed. If Madam Curio came back and saw him standing by an open window, she’d suspect treachery even though the window was at least thirty feet above the ground. Finally, as the minute hand ticked into place, announcing eight-fifteen, James jumped off the bed. He grabbed the letter from the bedside table and ran lightly toward the far right window. The latch turned easily and James opened the window onto cool, misty night. The sky had finally cleared, revealing a dusting of silvery stars, but there was no sign of Nobby. James leaned over the sill, looking along the ledge, and a monstrous silent shape loomed out of the darkness toward him, blotting out the stars. It fell over him heavily, surrounded him, and yanked him bodily out the window before he had time to shout for help.

The figure squeezed him so that James’ breath whooshed out of him. Far below, a voice called in a loud stage whisper, “Not so hard! You’ll grind his bones, already!” James was amazed to recognize Zane’s voice. The gigantic hand loosened a bit and James saw yards of female giant going past as he was lowered toward the ground.

“Nicely done, Prechka!” Zane called, patting the giant on her shin. She grunted happily and opened her hand, unrolling James onto the ground between her massive feet.

“I thought you were just bringing Nobby!” James gasped, clambering up.

“It was Ted’s idea,” Ralph said, moving out of the shadow of a nearby shrubbery. “He knew you’d want to get out and see to this whole Merlin affair, especially now. He went off to find Grawp the moment you were taken off by Jackson. Grawp found Prechka, who’s tall enough to reach the hospital wing, and we were just trying to figure out how to get you to the window when you ducked at us. Worked out pretty neatly, we thought.”

“I’ll say,” James said, rubbing his ribs with the heel of his left palm. “Good thing she’s left-handed or I’d probably need a whole new dose of Skelegro for my arm. She’s got a *grip*! So where is Ted, anyway?”

“House arrest, along with the rest of the Gremlins,” Zane said, shrugging. “McGonagall knew they were involved in the broomstick thieving plot, even if she can’t prove it yet. She probably would have let it slide—she has bigger frogs to dissect with Recreant and Sacarhina here – but Jackson’s idea was to have all the Gremlins out of the way until tomorrow, when the whole thing with this Prescott dude was taken care of. Ted was sent off to the Gryffindor common room the moment he got back from the forest with Grawp. Everybody’s there except Sabrina, who took a pretty ugly gigantism curse from Corsica. Her nose is the size of a soccerball. Nothing for it but to sleep it off, apparently. I think we’d have been under guard, too, except that Jackson thinks Ralph’s too dim to be involved in the broomstick plot and I had the perfect alibi, being right there on the field the whole time. So, here we are. What’s the plan, James?”

James glanced from Zane, to Ralph, to Prechka, and then took a deep breath. “Same as before. We need to get out to the Grotto Keep to stop Jackson, Delacroix and whoever else is involved. We still need to capture the Merlin staff, if we can, and most importantly, we need to escape so we can testify about whoever is involved.”

“Hear, hear,” Ralph agreed.

“But first,” James said, holding up the letter he’d written to his dad. “I need to send this. I should’ve sent it weeks ago, but better late than never. Ted was right. We need help. If we hadn’t asked the Gremlins to help us, I’d still be stuck up there in the hospital wing.”

“If we hadn’t asked the Gremlins to help us, you might not have gotten thrown in there in the first place,” Ralph muttered, but without much feeling.

“Zane,” James said, turning toward him and stuffing the letter into his pocket. “What time is the alignment supposed to happen?”

“Nine fifty-five,” Zane answered. “We’ve only got an hour and a half.”

James nodded. “Meet me at the edge of the forest near the lake in fifteen minutes. Bring Prechka if she’ll come.”

Zane looked up the dark bulk of the giantess. “I don’t think we could get rid of her if we wanted to. She seems to like helping.”

“Excellent. Ralph, you have your wand?”

Ralph produced his ridiculously large wand from his back pocket. The lime-green painted tip glowed eerily in the darkness. “Don’t leave home without it,” he said.

“All right, keep it handy. You’re on guard duty. Try to remember everything we learned in D.A.D.A. and be ready to put it to use. This is it, then. Let’s go.”

James darted through the shadows of the corridors, trying to move both quickly and inconspicuously, which was rather a challenge. He arrived at the portrait hole just as Steven Metzker was coming out.

“James!” Steven said, blinking in surprise. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be...” he stopped, and then glanced around the darkened corridors. “Get inside before anyone sees you.”

“Thanks, Steven,” James said, ducking into the portrait hole.

“Don’t mention it,” Steven replied. “And I really mean that. I never saw you, and you never saw me. Don’t make me regret this.”

“Regret what? Nothing happened.”

Steven stepped into the hall as the portrait of the fat lady swung shut on James.

The Gremlins, except for Sabrina, were gathered by the fireplace looking sulky and agitated. Noah saw James and sat up. “I see Prechka found her man.” The others turned and grinned wickedly.

“What are you doing here?” Ted said, growing serious. “Ralph and Zane just left to get you. It took us half the night to get your stuff sorted out after that disaster at the Quidditch pitch, so its getting pretty late. You should be heading out to the Island. You want us to come along?”

“No, you’re all in enough trouble. I just came to mail this,” He held up the letter. Ted nodded in approval, sensing who it was for. “I’m meeting Ralph and Zane by the forest in ten minutes.”

“I want to come,” Noah said, standing up. “Corsica cursed Sabrina. I want to return the favor on her behalf.”

James shook his head. “You three have a different job tonight, and it may well involve a curse or two. If Ralph, Zane and I fail, Jackson or somebody will probably show up here looking for the Merlin robe. You three need to guard it. If anyone comes looking for it, you have to stop them, no matter what. I hate to ask you to do that, but... will you?”

Petra nodded and looked at Noah and Ted. “Not a problem. But as much as we’d all like a chance to plug one of those guys, do try not to fail, won’t you?”

James nodded, and then turned and ran up the stairs to the boys' sleeping quarters. The room was empty and dark but for one candle near the door to the tiny bathroom. Nobby, who hadn't gotten the principal of the Owlery and continued to show up at James' window, was sleeping in his cage.

"Nobby," James whispered urgently, "got a message for you to deliver to Dad. I know it's late, but it's really important." The great bird raised his head from beneath his wing and clicked his beak sleepily. James opened the cage door, letting Nobby hop out onto the ledge of the table. When the note was tied to Nobby's outstretched leg, James opened the window.

"And this time, when you come back, go to the Owlery. Nice as it is to have you around, you're going to get me in even more trouble. All right?"

The owl peered at James with his enormous, inscrutable eyes, then hopped onto the window ledge. With a gust of flapping wings, Nobby launched out into the darkness.

James was about to plunge back down the stairs again when his eye was caught by the dark bulk of his trunk. Was it slightly out of its normal position? He felt a sudden, icy dread. Maybe Jackson had already been for the robe. Perhaps he'd checked his briefcase before heading out to the Grotto Keep, just to be sure, and discovered the trickery. Surely the Gremlins below would have seen Jackson coming and going, but then again, maybe not. As James had realized earlier, Jackson was smart. Maybe he'd disguised himself, or maybe he'd asked Madame Delacroix to use her remote physio-apparation skills to simply appear in the boys' sleeping quarters to collect the robe directly. Then again, Ted had mentioned that Zane and Ralph had been there, sorting things out after the Quidditch disaster. James had to know. He hunkered down next to his trunk and produced his wand. The case unlocked at his command and he riffled through the contents until he found the case buried at the bottom. It was still there, but it was slightly open. James gasped in fear, then felt inside. His fingers found the smooth folds of cloth. He could even smell that haunting smell of leaves and earth and living, breathing winds. He heaved a gigantic sigh of relief.

With the trunk open, James wondered if there was anything he might need for his adventure at the Island. He glanced around at the unruly pile of clothes and supplies on the end of his bed. After a moment's consideration, he grabbed the Marauder's Map and the invisibility cloak. He clapped the trunk shut, used his wand to lock it, and then, having left his backpack on the table in the hospital wing, he stuffed the map and the cloak into a leather book bag his mum had given him at the beginning of the year. He turned and clumped down the stairs quickly, stopping only to remind Noah, Petra and Ted about Delacroix's powers.

"Don't worry," Noah said, jumping up and heading for the stairs. "We'll take turns keeping an eye on your trunk. One-hour shifts, right Ted?"

Ted nodded. Satisfied, James ducked through the portrait hole to go meet Ralph and Zane.

Five minutes later, as he came out of the courtyard and onto the grounds, James' eyes were too dazzled from the interior lights to be able to see clearly in the darkness. He felt his way down the slope toward the lake until he heard Zane whistling, apparently trying to sound like a bird. The sound came from

his left, and as James turned toward it, he was finally able to make out the bulk of the giantess standing at the edge of the woods. Zane and Ralph were huddled nearby.

“That was pretty good, wasn’t it?” Zane said, grinning. “I saw that in a James Bond movie. I thought you’d appreciate it.”

“Nice,” James nodded. The cool of the night air settled over him and James felt a wild sense of excitement and fear. This was it. There was no turning back. Even now, his absence from the hospital wing was probably being discovered. There might be trouble tomorrow, but if they failed now, there’d be even worse trouble to come. James glanced up at Prechka. “Will she let us ride on her shoulders? It’s the only way we’ll get there in time.”

Prechka heard him. In answer, she bent down, making the earth shudder as her knees struck the hillside. “Prechka help,” she said, trying to keep the boom out of her voice. “Prechka carry small ones.” She grinned at James and her head, now at his level, was nearly as tall as he was. Zane, Ralph and James took turns scrambling up her arm and onto the giantess’ great, sloping shoulders. James needed Ralph and Zane to help him up, as his splinted right arm was almost no use to him. When she stood, it was like riding a freight elevator into the treetops. Without a word, she began to lumber into the forest. The upper branches of the trees swept past, occasionally groaning as Prechka pushed them aside like reeds.

“How does she know where she’s going?” James asked in a hushed voice.

Ralph shrugged. “Grawp told her. I don’t know how, but apparently it’s a giant thing. They just remember where they’ve been and how to get there again. It’s probably how they find each other’s hovels in the mountains. I didn’t understand the language at all, but she seems pretty sure of herself.”

Riding Prechka was an altogether different experience than riding Grawp. Where the he-giant had been careful and delicate, the giantess swayed and thumped, her footsteps shuddering up her body and shaking the boys. James thought it was rather like riding on a gigantic walking metronome. The forest swam past, eerie from this strange, high perspective, as if it were clawing at the sky. After a while, James tugged on the giantess’ burlap tunic. “Stop here, Prechka. We’re close and I don’t want them to hear us coming, if we can avoid it.”

Prechka put out a hand, halting herself against a huge, gnarled oak tree. Carefully, she lowered herself and the boys climbed off her shoulders, sliding down her arm to the ground.

“Wait here, Prechka,” James said into the giantess’ enormous, lumpy face. She nodded slowly, seriously, and then stood again. He could only hope that her understanding of their wishes was better than Grawp’s, who had wandered off in search of food after only a few minutes when he’d brought them out here last year.

“This way,” Zane said, pointing. James could see the glitter of moonlight on water through the trees. As quietly as possible, the boys threaded through the tree trunks and underbrush. Within a few minutes, they

emerged at the perimeter of the lake. The island of the Grotto Keep could be seen further along the edge of the water. It loomed monstrosly, grown to gothic, cathedral proportions for its ultimate night. The dragon's head bridge was clearly visible, open wide, both welcoming and threatening at the same time. James heard Ralph gulp. Silently, they made their way toward it.

As they reached the opening onto the bridge, the moon slipped from behind a raft of wispy clouds. The island of the Grotto Keep unveiled fully in that silvery glow. There was virtually no hint of the wild, wooded nature of the island now. The dragon's head bridge was a carefully sculpted horror, yawning open before them. At its throat, the vine encrusted gate was as solid-looking and ornate as wrought iron. James could clearly read the poem inscribed on the doors.

"It's closed," Zane whispered, rather hopefully. "Does that mean anything?"

James shook his head. "I don't know. Come on, let's see if we can get in."

Single file, the three boys tiptoed across the bridge. James, in the lead, saw the bridge's upper jaw open further as they approached the gate. It didn't creak this time. The motion was silent and oily, almost unnoticeable. The gates, however, remained firmly closed. James made to reach for his wand, and then stopped, hissing in pain. He'd forgotten about the splint on his fractured right arm.

"Ralph, you'll have to do it," James said, sidling to the right to let Ralph in front of him. "My wand hand's no use. Besides, you're the spells genius."

"Wh-what am I supposed to do?" Ralph stammered, pulling out his wand.

"Just use the unlocking spell."

"Whoa, wait!" Zane said, throwing up a hand. "Last time we tried that we were almost tree food, remember?"

"That was then," James said reasonably. "The island wasn't ready. Tonight's the night it exists for, I think. It'll let us in this time. Besides, this is Ralph. If anybody can do it, he can."

Zane grimaced, but couldn't offer any argument. He took a step backwards, giving Ralph room. Ralph pointed his wand at the gates nervously, his wand hand shaking. He cleared his throat.

"What is it? I always forget!"

"Alohomora," James whispered encouragingly. "Emphasis on the second and fourth syllables. You've done it loads of time. Don't worry."

Ralph stiffened, trying to halt the shivering of his arm. He took a deep breath and, in a tremulous voice, spoke the command.

Immediately the vines twining the gates began to loosen. The letters of the poem dissolved into curls and tendrils, contracting from the wooden shapes of the doors. After a few seconds, the doors swung silently open.

Ralph glanced back at James and Zane, his eyes wide and worried. “Well, it worked, I guess.”

“I’d say so, Ralph,” Zane said, moving forward. The three of them stepped carefully into the darkness beyond the gates.

The inside of the Grotto Keep was circular and mostly empty, surrounded by trees that had grown into the shapes of pillars, supporting a thick, domed ceiling of branches and spring leaves. The floor of the Grotto was terraced with stone, forming steps that descended toward the middle. There, in the very center, a round bowl of earth was lit in a beam of bright moonlight that pierced a hole in the center of the domed canopy. The Merlin throne stood in that beam of moonlight, and in front of it, silhouetted against the moonlight, her back to them, was Madame Delacroix.

James felt weak with fear. He froze in place, and only distantly felt Ralph’s hand groping at him, tugging him backwards into the shadow of one of the tree-trunk pillars. He stumbled a little, and then dropped down behind the bulk of the tree, next to Ralph and Zane. Carefully, slowly, James peered around the tree-pillar, his eyes wide and his heart thundering.

Delacroix hadn’t moved. Her back was still to them, and she was still staring motionlessly at the throne. The Merlin throne was tall, straight-backed and narrow. It was made of polished wood, but was somehow more delicate than James had expected. The mass of it was formed of carvings of vines and leaves, curling and tangled. The only solid parts were the seat and the center of the backrest. The throne looked as if it had been grown rather than carved, much like the Grotto Keep itself. No one else was visible. Apparently, Delacroix had arrived early. James was wondering how long she’d been standing there, motionless, watching the throne, when there was the sound of someone else’s footsteps behind them, on the dragon’s head bridge. James held his breath, and sensed Ralph and Zane hunkering down as low as they could next to him, hiding among the low underbrush lining the Keep.

A man’s voice spoke a low command in some strange language James didn’t recognize. It sounded both beautiful and frightening. There was the sound of the gate’s vines unfurling again, and then footsteps clacked hollowly on the stone steps of the terraced floor. Professor Jackson moved into view, walking resolutely down into the center of the Grotto Keep behind Madame Delacroix.

“Professor Jackson,” Madame Delacroix said, her heavily accented voice ringing in the stone bowl of the Grotto. “You never fail to meet my expectations.” She still hadn’t turned around.

“Nor you mine, Madame. You are early.”

“I was savoring de moment, Theodore. It’s been a long time coming. I’d be tempted to say ‘too long’, if I was a believer in chance. I am not, of course. This is how it was meant to be. I have done what I was meant to do. Even you have performed the role you were pre-ordained to perform.”

“Do you really believe so, Madame?” Jackson asked, stopping several feet behind Delacroix. James noticed that Jackson had his hickory wand in his hand. “I wonder. I, as you know, am neither a believer in chance nor destiny. I am a believer in choices.”

“It matters not what you believe, Theodore, as long as your choices lead to the right ends.”

“I have the robe,” Jackson said flatly, abandoning the pretense of polite conversation. “I have always had it. You will not get it from me. I am here to see to that. I am here to stop you, Madame, despite your best efforts to keep me away.”

James almost gasped. He covered his mouth with his hand, stifling it. Jackson was here to stop her! But how? James felt a cold dread dawning on him. Next to him, Ralph whispered almost silently, “Did he say...?”

“Shh!” Zane hissed urgently. “Listen!”

Delacroix was making a strange, rhythmic sound. Her shoulders shook slightly with it, and James realized she was laughing. “My dear, dear Theodore, I have never attempted to thwart you. Why, if I had not allowed a token resistance to your presence on dis trip, you’d have never chosen to come at all. Your stubbornness and suspicious nature are my best tools. And I needed you, Professor. I needed what you had, what you believed so ardently dat you were protecting.”

Jackson stiffened. “Do you believe I was foolish enough to bring the robe with me tonight? Then you are more arrogant than I thought. No, the robe is safe. It is secured with the best hexes and counter-accio charms ever created. I know that, for they were created by me. You shall not find it, of that I am certain.”

But Delacroix was laughing harder. She still hadn’t turned around. The beam of light illuminating the chair seemed to be growing brighter, and James realized it was the accumulated light of the planets. They were moving into place. The time of the Hall of Elders’ Crossing was nearly upon them.

“Oh, Professor, your confidence cheers me. With enemies such as yourself, my success is all the more delicious. Do you think I haven’t known all along dat you guarded the robe of Merlinus in your case at all times? Do you think I was not preparing for de robe to be delivered to me from the moment I first arrived here? I haven’t had to lift so much as a finger, and yet de robe comes to me of its own accord dis very night.”

James had a horrible thought. He remembered that day in Defense Against the Dark Arts, when Jackson had followed Professor Franklyn into the classroom, speaking in low tones. Madame Delacroix had come to the door to tell Jackson his class was waiting. James had glanced down at that moment, and the case had mysteriously come open. Was it possible that Madame Delacroix had caused that to happen, just so that

James would see inside? Had she tried to use him somehow? He remembered Zane and Ralph saying that the capture of the robe had been easy. Somehow *too* easy. He shuddered.

“James,” Ralph whispered urgently. “You didn’t bring the robe with you tonight, did you?”

“Of course not!” James replied. “I’m not crazy!”

Zane leaned in to keep his voice as quiet as possible. “Then what’s in the book bag?”

James felt terror and anger mingling inside him. “The Marauder’s Map and the invisibility cloak!”

Ralph reached up and clutched James’ shoulder, turning him so that they were face to face. Ralph’s expression was horrible. “James, you don’t have the invisibility cloak!” he rasped, his voice cracking. “I do! You left it with me in the Slytherin holding pen, remember? I used it to escape! It’s in my trunk, back in the Slytherin boy’s quarters!”

James simply stared at Ralph, petrified. Below them, in the center of the Grotto Keep, Madame Delacroix continued to cackle.

“Mr. James Potter,” she called through her laughter. “Please feel free to join us. Bring your friends if you so desire.”

James felt rooted to the spot. He wouldn’t go down there, of course. He would run. He knew now that he had the robe of Merlinus in his book bag, that he had been tricked into bringing it along, tricked into thinking it was the invisibility cloak. Now was the moment to flee. And yet he didn’t. Ralph pushed him, urging him to go, but Zane, on James’ other side, slowly stood up and pulled out his wand.

“The voodoo queen thinks she’s pretty smart,” he said out loud, stepping around the pillar and pointing his wand at her. “You’re as ugly as you are evil. Crucio!”

James gasped as the bolt of red light shot from Zane’s wand. They’d never even seen the unforgivable curses in action, but Zane was giving it his best attempt. The curse struck Madame Delacroix directly in the back and James watched for her to double over in pain. She didn’t move, however, and James was dismayed to see that the bolt of red light had passed straight through her. It struck the ground near the throne and vanished harmlessly. Delacroix was still laughing as she turned to face Zane.

“Ugly, am I?” Her laughter dried up as her gaze met Zane’s. She was no longer blind, or old. It was, in fact, her wraith, the projected version of herself. “Evil? Perhaps, but only as a hobby.” The wraith of Madame Delacroix raised a hand and Zane was lifted from his feet roughly. His wand flew from his hand and he thumped against the tree-pillar, his shoes three feet from the ground. He seemed to be stuck there, as if on a hook. “If I was truly evil, I would kill you now, wouldn’t I?” She grinned at him, and then pivoted, pointing her arm at the place where James hid. “Mr. Potter, please, it is silly of you to fight me. You are, after all, almost my apprentice in this endeavor. Bring Mr. Deedle with you. Let’s all enjoy the spectacle, shall we?”

Jackson had turned when Zane came forward, watching with a noticeable lack of surprise, his wand still out, but pointed at the floor. Now he looked on as James and Ralph stood jerkily, as if against their will, and began to march down the steps toward the center of the Grotto. His eyes met James', his bushy dark brows low and furious. "Stop, Potter," he said quietly, raising his wand halfway, pointing it at the floor in front of James and Ralph. Their feet stopped moving, as if they'd suddenly landed in glue.

"Oh, Theodore, must you prolong dis?" Delacroix sighed. She swung her arm toward him and performed a complicated gesture with her fingers. Jackson's wand flicked out of his hand as if on a string. He grabbed for it, but it darted up and away. Delacroix made another gesture with her hand, and the wand snapped in mid-air, as if broken over a knee. Jackson's face didn't change, but he slowly lowered his hand, staring hard at the two pieces of his hickory wand. Then, he turned back to Delacroix, his face white with fury, and began to pace toward her. Delacroix's hand moved like lightning, darting into the folds of her clothing and coming out with her horrible graperoot wand between her fingers.

"Dis may only be a representation of de real thing," she said playfully, "conjured from the dirt of dis place, just like dis version of myself, but I assure you, Theodore, it is exactly as powerful as I think it is. Don't make me destroy you."

Jackson stopped in his tracks, but his face didn't change. "I can't let you go through with this, Delacroix. You know that."

"Oh, but you already have!" she cackled gleefully. She pointed the wand at Jackson and flicked it. A bolt of ugly orange light shot from it, sending Jackson flying violently backwards. He landed hard on the upper stone steps, grunting in pain. He struggled to get up, and Delacroix rolled her eyes. "Heroes," she said disdainfully, and flicked her wand again. Jackson flew off the ground and rammed against another of the tree-pillars lining the Grotto. He hung there, apparently knocked unconscious.

"And now," she said, lazily pointing her wand in the direction of James and Ralph. "Please, join me."

The two boys were lifted from the ground and transported down the rest of the steps. They dropped clumsily to their feet in the grassy space at the bottom of the Grotto, directly in front of the wraith of Madame Delacroix. Her eyes were emerald green and piercing. "Give me de robe. And please, don't make me harm either of you. I only ask de one time."

The book bag slipped off James' shoulder and struck the ground at his feet. He looked down at it, feeling dazed and completely hopeless. "Please," Delacroix said, and flicked her wand. James fell to his knees as if something extraordinarily heavy had landed on his shoulders. His hand plunged into the bag, clutched the robe, and pulled it out. Ralph struggled to grab it, but he seemed locked in place, unable to move more than a few inches in any direction. "Don't, James!"

"I'm not," he said hopelessly.

Delacroix's eyes sparkled greedily. She reached out a hand and delicately took the robe from James. "Free will is highly over-rated," she said airily.

"You won't win." James said angrily. "You don't have all the relics."

Delacroix looked up from the robe, meeting James' eyes with an expression of polite surprise. "Don't I, Mr. Potter?"

"No!" James said, gritting his teeth. "We didn't get the broomstick. Tabitha still has it. I'm not even sure if she knows what it is, but I don't see her bringing it to you now, either way." He hoped he was right as he said it. He didn't see the broomstick anywhere in sight, and Tabitha certainly didn't seem to be present, unless she was hiding, like they had been.

Delacroix laughed lightly, as if James had just made a very witty remark at a party. "Dat was de perfect hiding place, wasn't it, Mr. Potter? And Miss Corsica is such the perfect individual to harbor it for me. Why it's so perfect, in fact, that you never stood a chance of learning that it was, in fact, a clever lie. Interesting as it may be, Miss Corsica's broomstick is nothing more than a convenient ruse. No, like de robe, de Merlin staff has also found its way to me tonight, regardless of what you might think. It has been cared for very well, in fact."

The rather beautiful wraith of Madame Delacroix turned to Ralph and held out her hand. "Your wand, please, Mr. Deedle."

"N-no," Ralph protested, his voice almost a moan. He tried to back away.

"Don't make me insist, please, Ralph," Delacroix said, raising her own wand toward him.

Ralph's hand jerked up and went to his back pocket. Trembling, he produced his ridiculously huge wand. For the first time, James saw it for what it was. It wasn't just unusually thick, whittled to a point at one end. It was part of something that was, at one time, much larger, worn down with age, but still, as had been repeatedly shown, extremely and inexplicably powerful. Delacroix reached out and, almost daintily, plucked the Merlin staff from Ralph's hand.

"Dere was no point in my risking my own capture by smuggling such a thing onto the grounds. Surely, someone would have detected it, had it been in my possession. Thus, I arranged for it to be sold to you and your charming father, Mr. Deedle. I was your salesman, in fact, though in a different guise. I do hope you enjoyed the use of the staff. Quite powerful, wasn't it? Oh, but now I see," she added, turning almost apologetic, "you thought that it was you who was de powerful one, didn't you? I'm so sorry, Mr. Deedle. Did you really think you'd have been allowed to enter the Keep if you hadn't had de staff of Merlin with you? Surely, even you can see de humor in dat, can't you? You, a Muggle-born. Please, forgive me." She laughed again, lightly, maliciously.

She turned then, and very carefully began to arrange the relics on the throne. James and Ralph looked at each other miserably, and then James tried to look back at Zane, who was still stuck to the tree-pillar behind them, but the darkness was too thick.

Madame Delacroix stepped back from the throne, breathing in a great long breath of anticipation. She positioned herself between Ralph and James, as if they were compatriots. "Dere we go. Oh, I am so pleased. I do hate so say it, but everything has worked out exactly as I had planned. Enjoy the spectacle, my young friends. I cannot guarantee dat Merlinus will not destroy you with his arrival, but surely you do not think dat too high a price to pay to observe such a thing."

"It'll be worth it if it destroys you, too," James said through gritted teeth.

"Such venom," Delacroix replied, smiling. "No wonder you made such a good apprentice."

The robe of Merlin had been draped across the back of the throne, as if Merlin would simply shrug into it when he appeared. The last bit of Merlin's staff leaned against the front of the throne. The beam of combined moon and starlight had become very bright, drawing a dim line through the darkness from the hole in the domed ceiling to the center of the grassy area below. The three relics glowed in the shimmering, silvery light. The time of the Hall of Elders' Crossing had come.

James heard something. He knew Madame Delacroix and Ralph had heard it, too. All three turned their heads, trying to locate the source of the noise. It was low and whispering, coming from all directions at once. It was tremulous and distant, almost like a low note on a hundred far off flutes, but it was growing louder. Madame Delacroix glanced about, her face a mask of glee, and yet James was sure that, wraith or not, there was a hint of fear on her face as well. She suddenly gripped both boys' arms in her steely hands. "Look!" she breathed.

Tendrils of mist were pouring in between the pillars of the Grotto, bringing the sound with them. James glanced around. The tendrils were seeping in between the branches of the domed ceiling as well. They were as insubstantial as smoke, but moved intelligently, with growing speed. They snaked toward the throne, and there they began to collect. As the tendrils combined, they writhed and collapsed, forming only hazy shapes at first, and then hardening, coming into focus. A line of slightly curved, horizontal bars coalesced in the center of the throne. With an involuntary shudder, James saw that they were the ribs of a skeleton. A spine grew from them, both up and down, connecting to two more shapes, the skull and the pelvis. This, James realized, was an apparition happening in extreme slow motion. The atoms of Merlin were streaming back together, fighting the collected inertia of the centuries. The sound that accompanied the apparition was growing both in volume and pitch, rising through the octaves and becoming almost human.

"Hey, voodoo queen," a voice immediately behind James suddenly said, making all three of them jump. "Dodge this,"

A length of log slammed down onto Delacroix's head, disintegrating it into a hundred clods of wet dirt. Instantly, the binding curse on both James and Ralph fell away. James spun and saw Zane holding the

end of the log, pulling it back out of the mess of Delacroix's wraith, which was struggling to rebuild itself. From the shoulders up, Delacroix seemed to be made entirely of broken dirt, writhing roots and worms. The wraith's hands scrabbled at the ruined neck, trying to push the clods back into shape.

"She forgot about me when Merlin started forming!" Zane shouted, yanking the log free and hoisting it back over his shoulder. "I fell off the pillar and just grabbed the closest heavy thing I could find. Get the robe and the staff!" Zane swung the log like a baseball bat, taking off one of Delacroix's arms at the shoulder. It hit the ground and shattered into a mess of dirt and worms.

James jumped forward and snatched a handful of Merlin's robe, reaching his left hand through the forming shape of the wizard. He pulled, but the robe fought back, struggling to maintain its position. Digging his heels into the soft earth, James yanked as hard as he could. The robe wrung from the back of the throne, coming through the skeletal shape seated on it. The shape gripped the arms of the throne and seemed to scream, bringing the pitch of the haunting drone up another octave. Ralph lunged and grabbed at the staff, which was growing in length even as the figure on the throne gained solidity. He jumped back with it, holding it high over his head.

The wraith of Madame Delacroix seemed caught between trying to reform itself and trying to get the robe and the staff back into place. It waved its remaining arm wildly at Ralph, then clawed at the robe in James' hands. Zane danced behind the wraith, the log held high, then brought it down again, burying it almost waist deep in the disintegrating figure. James glanced toward the Merlin throne and saw that the figure there, which had formed to a full skeleton with ghostly musculature clinging to it like moss, was writhing horribly, beginning to melt again into mist. The sound of Merlin's apparation had become a keening shriek.

And then, as if out of nowhere, another figure was among them. It resolved from the darkness beyond the Grotto Keep, moving with terrible speed. It was the dryad with the horribly long, blue fingernails, but only just barely. There was something else moving within the shape, as if the dryad was merely a costume. A new voice joined the keening wail of the half-formed Merlin.

Master! No! I will not fail you! Your time has come at last!

The figure split somehow, completely abandoning the form of the dryad. It became simply two enormous, black talons. They lunged simultaneously at James and Ralph, snatching the robe and the staff back and sending the two boys sprawling to the stone steps. The talons spun, placing the relics back into their positions, and then retracted, falling into dust, as if exhausted.

The figure on the throne shuddered violently, drawing itself back together, and the tendrils of mist roared toward it, solidifying now with terrible speed. The bones grew muscles, layer upon layer. Organs bloomed inside the chest and abdomen, forming from the veins out. The body filled the robe, and the robe took shape over it. Skin collected on the body like dew, first as a filmy membrane, but thickening, growing ruddy and tan. The fingers clutched the staff, which had grown to a length of six feet, tapered gently at the bottom and with a heavy, knobbed end. Runes ran up and down the staff, pulsing with a faint green light.

The noise of Merlin's return resolved into a long scream, and the wizard finally ran out of breath, his head thrown back, the chords of his neck drawn taut as wire. After a long moment, he drew his first breath in a thousand years, filling his huge chest, and lowered his head.

Master! a ghostly voice cried out. James looked from the figure on the throne to the shape that had resolved out of the awful talons. It was a small man, almost invisible. He panted, his bald head glistening in the faint moonlight. *You have returned! My work is complete! I am released!*

"I have returned," the voice of Merlin agreed. The face was stony, the eyes locked onto the ghost. "But what time is this you have returned me to, Austramaddux?"

Th- the world is made ready for you, Master! the ghost stammered, its voice high and frightened. *I... I waited until the perfect time for your coming! The balance of the magicked and the magickless is ripe for your hand, Master! The time... the time is come!*

Merlin stared at the ghost, utterly unmoving.

Please, Master! Austramaddux screamed, falling to his ghostly knees. *I have watched for centuries! My duty... my duty was more than I could bear! I waited as long as I could. I only helped a little! I found a woman, Master! Her heart was open to me! She shared our goals, so I... I encouraged her! I helped, but only a little! A little!"*

Merlin's gaze moved from Austramaddux to the wraith of Madame Delacroix, which had mostly reconstituted itself. It flung itself to its knees, and when it spoke, the voice sounded as if it came through a mouthful of dirt. "I am your servant, Merlinus. I have summoned you to fulfill your destiny, to lead us against de Muggle worms. We are prepared for you. The world is ripe for you."

"This puppet of filth is to be my muse?" Merlin said, his voice low but nearly thundering with intensity. "Let us see her as she is, then, not as she wishes to be seen."

Delacroix straightened herself and began to speak, but nothing came out. Her jaw worked, almost mechanically, and then, chillingly, deep choking sounds began to emerge from her throat. The wraith's hands floated upwards, rising to clutch at the neck, then to scrabble at it, digging in with long fingernails so that strips of muddy flesh began to peel away. The throat bulged, almost like that of a bullfrog, and the wraith suddenly bent at the waist, as if it was going to be sick. Merlin's eyes blazed at the wraith and his staff glowed softly, the runes rippling with their inner light. Finally, violently, Madame Delacroix's wraith heaved and the jaw split wide open, far past its logical limits. Something ripped forth from the yawning, horrible mouth. It poured out onto the ground before it. The wraith's body shrunk as the mess poured from its mouth. It was almost as if the wraith turned inside out, emptying itself out of its own mouth, until all that was left was the thing lying prone on the ground, writhing and awful. It was Madame Delacroix as she really was, somehow transported from her remote place of safety and vomited from her puppeted form. She wracked against the floor as if in great pain, her shape emaciated and bony, her eyes blank gray orbs, staring blindly at the ceiling.

“Austramaddux, you have brought me to a dead time,” Merlin said, his low voice filling the Grotto like the roar of a thousand deeps. He turned away from the pathetic shape of Madame Delacroix, returning his gaze to the cowering ghost. “The trees have awakened for me, but their voice is nearly mute. Even the earth sleeps the sleep of centuries. You have returned me to suit yourself and yourself alone. You were a faulty servant when I agreed to apprentice you, and I have returned only to realize the depth of that mistake. I discharge you from my service. Begone.”

Merlin raised his free hand and held it, palm out, toward the ghost of Austramaddux. The ghost paled even further and shrank away, raising its hands as if to deflect a blow. *No! No, I was faithful! Please! Do not discharge me! I fulfilled my duty! I was faithful! Nooo!*

The last word elongated and rose in pitch, climbing the scale as the ghost seemed to shrink. For a moment, it assumed the form of the blue dryad, cringing and desperate, then it began to lose its shape entirely. It dwindled, and James saw that it contracted in the same proportion as Merlin’s closing hand, as if the wizard were squeezing Austramaddux in his outstretched fist. The ghost’s last word bled into a wail of horror, diminishing even as the ghost collapsed into a bright, flickering point of light. Merlin squeezed his fist, and then opened his hand with a roll of the fingers. The ghost popped, vanished, leaving only the echo of its final scream.

Finally, as if noticing them for the first time, Merlin turned his attention to James, Ralph and Zane. James moved forward, not sure what he would do, but knowing in his heart he had to do something. Merlin raised his hand again, this time towards James. James felt the world soften around him, darkening. He fought it, tried to shout out against the descending oblivion, but it was no use. He could fight the power of Merlin as much as a gnat might fight a gale. The world streamed away, funneling down to a point, and at the center of the point was the upraised hand of Merlin, pulling him in. There was an eye in the center of the hand, blue like ice. The eye closed, and Merlin’s voice said one word, a word that seemed to fill the blackness where the world had once been, and that word was “Sleep.”