



3. THE GHOST AND THE INTRUDER

James awoke early. The room was silent but for the breathing of his fellow Gryffindors and the whistling snore of Noah several beds away. The light in the room was only a few shades above night, a sort of pearly rose color. James tried to go back to sleep but his mind was too full of all the unknowns that he was sure to experience in the next twelve hours. After a few minutes, he swung his feet out of bed and began to dress.

The halls of Hogwarts, while relatively quiet and empty, seemed busy in a completely different way this early in the morning. Dewy coolness and morning shadows filled the spaces, but there was a hint of busy commotion just out of sight, behind unmarked doors, down flights of narrow steps. As James moved among the corridors and passed empty classrooms that would later be filled with activity, he caught second-hand clues of the house elf activity that thrived in the morning hours; a bucket and mop, still dripping, propped

open a bathroom door; the scent of baking bread and the clatter of pots and pans drifted up a short flight of stairs; a row of windows stood with tapestries draped carefully out of them for airing.

James meandered to the Great Hall, but found it quiet and empty, the ceiling glowing a pale rose as the sky outside absorbed the light of the sunrise. James blinked and looked again. Something was moving among the semi-transparent rafters and beams. A gray shape flitted, humming a rather annoying little tune. James watched, trying to make out what it was. It seemed to be a small, fat man-shape with a gleefully impish expression of concentration. Against all probability, the figure seemed to be very carefully balancing tiny objects on the edges of some of the rafters. James noticed that the balanced objects were directly above the House tables, arranged at intervals, and balanced so delicately as to fall at the slightest breeze.

“Fi!” The figure suddenly cried, making James jump. It had seen him. It swooped down upon him so swiftly that James almost dropped his books. “Who spies on the spy when he’s planning his morning funnies!?” the figure sang, annoyance and glee mingled in its voice.

“Oh.” James said, sighing. “I know you. Dad and Mum told me about you. Peeves.”

“And I know you, little crumpet!” Peeves announced merrily, looping around James. “Little Potter boy, James! Oooo! Sneaking about early-early, unlike your Daddy! He preferred the night, he did! Seeking a spot of breakfast, is we? Oh, so sorry, all the little elfy-welfies are still cooking it up in the basements. Hogwarts belongs only to Peeves this early. Care for a Peruvian ballistic bean instead?”

Peeves shoved a wispy arm toward James’s face. The tiny objects filling Peeves’s hand looked like dried green kidney beans.

“No! Thanks! I’ll—I’ll be off, then.” James hooked a thumb over his shoulder and began to back away.

“Suresy, are we? Mmm! Beans, beans, the musical fruit!” Peeves dismissed James and swooped back up to the rafters again. “The more I plant, the more to toot! Tooty fruits in little Potters’ pumpkin juice, perhaps!” he cackled merrily.

James wandered until he was out of earshot of Peeves’s singing. After a few minutes he found himself on a long pillared balcony overlooking the school grounds. Mist arose from the lake in a great golden cloud, burning off in the sun. James leaned against a railing, soaking up the happiness and excitement of beginning his first day.

Something moved in the stillness. James glanced toward it. It had been at the edge of the forest, near Hagrid’s cabin. Perhaps Hagrid was back. James studied the cabin. There was still no smoke in the chimney. The yard looked untended and overgrown. James frowned slightly. Why wasn’t Hagrid back yet? He knew that the half-giant had a notorious soft spot for beasts and monsters, and he worried, along with his parents, that this would eventually be his undoing. Perhaps the alliance with the giants, tentative at the best

of times, had fallen apart. Perhaps they had attacked Hagrid and Grawp, or imprisoned them somehow. Perhaps-

The movement caught James's eye again. Just behind the stack of firewood by Hagrid's cabin there was a flicker of color and a flash. James squinted, leaning as far over the balcony railing as he could. There it was again. A head peered over the firewood. In the distance, James could only see that it was a man, about his dad's age. The face seemed to study the grounds, and then the man stood slowly and raised a camera. The flash came again as the man took a picture of the castle.

James was about to go find someone to tell about this strange sight, a teacher or even a house elf, when something flew suddenly past him. James jumped aside, dropping his books for certain this time. The figure was white, semi-transparent, and utterly silent. It streamed past him and swooped down to the ground below, aiming for the interloper with the camera. The ghostly form was indistinct in the brightening sunlight, but the interloper saw it coming as if he had expected it. The man let out a little shriek of fear but didn't run, despite the fact that at least part of him seemed to want to. Jerkily, he raised the camera again and snapped off a few quick shots of the ghostly form as it streaked towards him. Finally, just as the form was about to overtake him, the man spun on his heels and sprinted clumsily into the perimeter of the woods, disappearing into the darkness within. The ghost pulled up at the edge of the woods like a dog on the end of its leash. It peered in, then prowled back and forth restlessly. After a minute, it turned and began to return to the castle. As James watched, it began to take on a somewhat more solid shape. By the time the figure had returned to the ground in front of the balcony, it looked like a young man. The ghostly man walked with a determined, if rather dejected gait, head down. Then he glanced up, saw James, and stopped. There was a long moment of perfect stillness in which the man stared up at James, his transparent face expressionless. Then the figure simply evaporated, quickly and completely.

James stared at the place where the figure had been. He knew he hadn't imagined it. Ghosts were as much a part of Hogwarts as wands and moving paintings. He'd seen the Ravenclaw House ghost, the Grey Lady, only the day before, gliding down a corridor and looking quaintly morose. He was looking forward to meeting Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor House ghost. But this ghost was new to him. Of course, his parents couldn't have told him about every little detail of life at Hogwarts. A great deal of it was new to him. Still, the figure nagged at him, as did the sight of the man with the camera, sneaking about and taking pictures. Could he have been from one of the wizarding tabloids? Not the Quibbler, of course. James knew the people who ran that publication, and they wouldn't be interested in the snoozing morning life of Hogwarts. Still, there were plenty of muck-raking wizarding publications always interested in the supposed dirty little secrets of Hogwarts, the Ministry, and even James's Dad.

Heading back toward the common room where he hoped to find Ted or one of the Gremlins before breakfast, James remembered that he hadn't yet given his parents' greetings to Professor Longbottom. He determined to do so at breakfast, and to use the opportunity to ask Neville about the ghost and the man with the camera.

In the Great Hall, however, Neville was nowhere to be seen. The long tables were now crowded with students in their school robes.

“So you saw some guy snapping pictures out on the grounds?” Ralph asked around a mouthful of French toast. “What’s the big deal about that?”

“I’m more interested in the ghost,” Zane said determinedly. “I wonder how he was killed? Do ghosts only come back when they’ve been killed in some really messy way?”

James shrugged. “I don’t know. Ask one of the older guys. For that matter ask Nick when you see him next.”

“Nearly Headless Nick?” Sabrina said from further down the table.

“Yeah. Where’s he at? We have a question for him.”

“Gone.” Sabrina said, shaking her head so that the quill in her hair wobbled. “He hasn’t been with us since our first year. Finally made it into the Headless Hunt after all those years. We had a party for him, and then off he went. He never came back. Must have been the thing he needed to finally move on. Good for him, too. But still.”

“The Headless...?” Ralph queried tentatively, as if he wasn’t sure he wanted clarification.

“He never came back?” James repeated. “But he was the Gryffindor House ghost! Who’s our ghost now?”

Sabrina shook her head again. “Don’t have one at the moment. Some of us thought it’d be old Dumbledore, but no luck.”

“But...” James said, but didn’t know how to continue. Every House had a ghost, right? He thought of the wispy shape that had turned into the silent young man on the front lawn.

“Mail call!” Zane called. Everyone looked up as owls began to swoop in through the high windows. The air was suddenly full of flapping wings and dropping letters and packages. James’s eyes widened as he recalled Peeves’s strange project from earlier that morning. Before he could say anything, the first loud pop rang out and a girl screamed in surprise and anger. She stood up from a nearby table, her robe spattered with yellow gobbets.

“My eggs blew up!” she exclaimed.

More pops erupted throughout the hall as the owls banked among the rafters.

Zane looked around wildly, trying to see what was going on.

“Time to go, mates!” James called, trying not to laugh. As he spoke, a Peruvian ballistic bean dropped from a rafter nearby, landing in a half empty cup and exploding with a loud pop. Juice erupted out

of the cup like a tiny volcano. As James, Zane and Ralph ran out of the milling chaos, Peeves swooped and dove through the Great Hall, laughing gleefully and singing about musical fruit.

Technomancy class was held in one of the smaller classrooms in the levels above the main hall. It had one window immediately behind the teacher's desk, and the morning sun shone directly through it, making Professor Jackson's head a corona of golden light. He bent over the desk, scratching away with a quill and parchment as Zane and James arrived. They found seats in the uncomfortable hush of the room, taking care not to break the silence by scraping their chairs. Slowly, the room filled, few students daring to speak, so that no noise could be heard except the busy scritch of the professor's quill. Finally, he consulted the clock on his desk and stood up, smoothing the front of his dark grey tunic.

"Welcome, students. My name, as you may know, is Theodore Jackson. I will be instructing you this year in the study of Technomancy. I believe a great deal in reading, and I put a great stock in listening. You will do much of both in my class." His voice was calm and measured, more refined than James had expected. His iron grey hair was combed with military neatness. His bushy black eyebrows made a line as straight as a ruler across his forehead.

"It has been said," Jackson continued, beginning to pace slowly around the room, "that there is no such thing as a stupid question. No doubt you yourselves have been told this. Questions, it is supposed, are the sign of an inquisitive mind," he stopped, surveying them critically. "On the contrary, questions are merely the sign of a student who has not been paying attention."

Zane nudged James with his elbow. James glanced at him, then at his parchment. Zane had already drawn a simple but remarkably accurate caricature of the professor. James stifled a laugh, as much at Zane's audacity as at the drawing.

Jackson continued. "Pay attention in class. Take notes. Read the assigned texts. If you can accomplish these things, you will find very little need for questions. Mind you, I am not forbidding questions. I am merely warning you to consider whether any question would require my repeating myself. If it does not, I will commend you. If it does, I will..." he paused, allowing his gaze to roam over the room. "*remind* you of this conversation."

Jackson had completed his circuit of the room. He turned to the chalkboard next to the window. Taking his wand out of a sheath in his sleeve, he flicked it at the board. “Who, pray, might be able to tell me what the study of Technomancy entails?” On the chalkboard the word spelled out in neat slanting cursive. There was a long, uncomfortable pause. Finally, a girl raised her hand tentatively.

Jackson gestured at her. “Call it out, Miss, er... forgive me, I will learn all your names in time. Gallows, is it?”

“Sir,” the girl said in a small voice, apparently thinking of Franklyn’s advice from the day before. “Technomancy is, I believe, the study of the science of magic?”

“You are of the Ravenclaw House, Miss Gallows?” Jackson asked, eyeing her. She nodded. “Five points for Ravenclaw, then, although I don’t approve of the word ‘believe’ in my class. Belief and knowledge have little, if anything, in common. In this class we will apply ourselves to knowledge. Science. Facts. If you want belief, Mistress Delacroix’s class will be convening down the hall in the next hour.” He pointed, and for the first time there was the surfacing of something like humour in the stony façade. A few students dared to smile and laugh quietly. Jackson turned, flicking his wand at the chalkboard again.

“The study of the science of magic, yes. It is a common and sad misunderstanding that magic is a mystical or unnatural pursuit. Those that believe - and here I use the term ‘believe’ intentionally – those that believe magic is simply mystical are also prone to believe in such things as destiny, luck, and the American Quidditch team. In short, lost causes with no shred of empirical evidence to support them.” More smiles appeared in the room. Obviously there was more to Professor Jackson than met the eye.

“Magic,” he continued, as the chalkboard began to scribble his notes, “does not, I repeat, *does not* break any of the natural laws of science. Magic *exploits* those laws using very specific and creative methods. Mr. Walker.”

Zane jumped in his seat, looking up from the drawing he’d been working at while the others scribbled notes. Jackson was still facing the chalkboard, his back to Zane.

“I need a volunteer, Mr. Walker. Might I borrow your parchment?” It wasn’t a request. As he spoke, he flicked his wand and Zane’s parchment swooped up and wove toward the front of the room. Jackson caught it deftly with a raised hand. He turned slowly, holding the parchment up, not looking at it. The class looked with marked silence at the rather good caricature of Jackson Zane had drawn. Zane began to sink slowly in his seat, as if he was trying to melt under the desk.

“Is it simply magic that makes a true wizard’s drawing take on life?” Jackson asked. As he spoke, the drawing on the parchment moved. The expression changed from a caricature of steely-eyed sternness to one of cartoonish anger. The perspective pulled back, and now there was a desk in front of the Jackson drawing. A tiny cartoon version of Zane cowered at the desk. The Jackson drawing pulled out a gigantic cartoon clipboard and began to make red slashes on the clipboard, which had the letters O.W.L. across the top. The cartoon Zane fell on his knees, pleading silently with the Jackson caricature, which shook its head

imperiously. The cartoon Zane cried, his mouth a giant boomerang of woe, comic tears springing from his head.

Jackson turned his head and finally looked at the parchment in his hand as the class erupted into gales of laughter. He smiled a small but genuine smile. “Unfortunately, Mr. Walker, your subtracted five points cancel out Miss Gallows awarded five points. Ho hum. Such is life.”

He began to pace around the room again, placing the drawing carefully back onto Zane’s desk as he passed. “No, magic is not, as it were, simply a magic word. In reality, the true wizard learns to imprint his own personality on the paper using a means *other* than the quill. Nothing unnatural occurs. There is simply a different medium of expression taking place. Magic exploits the natural laws, but it does not break them. In other words, magic is not unnatural, but it is *supernatural*. That is, it is *beyond* the natural, but not outside it. Another example. Mr. um,”

Jackson pointed at a boy near him, who leaned suddenly back in his chair, looking rather cross-eyed at the pointing finger. “Murdock, sir.” the boy said.

“Murdock. You are of age for disapparation. I am correct?”

“Oh. Yes, sir.” Murdock said, seeming relieved.

“Describe disapparation for us, will you?”

Murdock looked perplexed. “S’pretty basic, isn’t it? I mean, it’s just a matter of getting a place nice and solid in your mind, closing your eyes, and, well making it happen. Then bang, you’re there.”

“Bang? You say?” Jackson said, his face blank.

Murdock reddened. “Well. Yeah, more or less. You just zap there. Just like that.”

“So, it is instantaneous, you’d say.”

“Yeah. I guess I’d say that.”

Jackson raised an eyebrow. “You guess?”

Murdock squirmed, glancing at those seated near him for help. “Er. No. I mean, yes. Definitely. Instantaneously. Like you said.”

“Like *you* said, Mr. Murdock.” Jackson corrected mildly. He was moving again, proceeding back toward the front of the room. He touched another student on the shoulder as he went. “Miss?”

“Sabrina Hildegard, sir.” Sabrina said as clearly and politely as she could.

“Would you be so kind as to perform a small favor for us, Miss Hildegard? We require the use of two ten-second timers from Professor Slughorn’s potions room. Second door on the left, I believe. Thank you.”

Sabrina hurried out as Jackson faced the classroom again. “Mr. Murdock, have you any idea what it is, precisely, that happens when you disappear?”

Murdock had apparently determined that abject ignorance was his safest tack. He shook his head firmly.

Jackson seemed to approve. “Let us examine it this way. Who can tell me where vanished objects go?”

This time Petra Morganstern raised her hand. “Sir. Vanished objects go nowhere, which is to say, they go everywhere.”

Jackson nodded. “A textbook answer, Miss. But an empty one. Matter cannot be in two places at once, nor can it be both everywhere and nowhere. I’ll save our time by not taxing this class’s ignorance on the subject any longer. This is the part where you listen and I speak.”

Around the room, quills were dipped and made ready. Jackson began to pace again. “Matter, as even you all know, is made up almost entirely of nothing. Atoms collect in space, forming a shape that, from our vantage point, seems solid. This candlestick,” Jackson laid his hand on a brass candlestick on his desk, “seems to us to be a single, very solid item, but is, in fact, trillions of tiny motes hovering with just enough proximity to one another as to imply shape and weight to our clumsy perspective. When we vanish it,” Jackson flicked his wand casually at the candlestick and it disappeared with a barely audible pop. “We are not moving the candlestick, or destroying it, or causing the matter that comprised it to cease being. Are we?”

Jackson’s piercing eyes roamed over the room, leaping from face to face as the students stopped writing, waiting for him to go on.

“No. Instead, we have altered the arrangement of the spaces between those atoms,” he said meaningfully. “We have expanded the distance from point to point, perhaps a thousandfold, perhaps a millionfold. The multiplication of those spaces expands the candlestick to a point of nearly planetary dimensions. The result is that we can actually walk through it, through the spaces between its atoms, and never even notice. In short, the candlestick is still here. It has simply been expanded so greatly, thinned to such an ephemeral level, as to become physically insubstantial. It is, in effect, everywhere, and nowhere.”

Sabrina returned with the timers, placing them onto Jackson’s desk. “Ah, thank you Miss Hildegard. Murdock.”

Murdock jumped again. There was a titter from the class. “Sir?”

“Fear not, my brave friend. I would like you to perform what I suspect you will find to be a very simple task. I’d like you to disappearate for us.”

Murdock looked shocked. “Disappearate? But... but nobody can disappearate on the school grounds, sir.”

“True enough. A quaint and merely symbolic restriction, but a restriction nonetheless. Fortunately for us, I have arranged a temporary educational allowance that will allow you, Mr. Murdock, to disappearate from over there,” Jackson paced to the front corner of the room and pointed at the floor. “To here.”

Murdock stood and swayed slightly as he worked out what the professor was asking. “You want me to disappearate from this room... to this room?”

“From over there, where you are, to here. This corner, if you could. I wouldn’t expect it to be much of a challenge. Except I’d like you to do it carrying this.” Jackson picked up one of the small hourglasses Sabrina had brought. “Turn it over at precisely the moment before you disappearate. Understood?”

Murdock nodded in relief. “No problem, sir. I can do that blindfolded.”

“I shouldn’t think that’d be necessary.” Jackson said, handing Murdock the timer. He returned to the front of the room, picking up the second timer himself.

“On three, Mr. Murdock. One... two... three!”

Both Murdock and Jackson turned their timers over. A split second later, Murdock vanished with a loud *crack*. Every eye in the room snapped towards the front corner.

Jackson held the timer, watching the sand flow silently through the pinched glass. He hummed a bit. He allowed himself to lean slightly on his desk. Then, lazily, he turned and looked into the front corner of the classroom.

There was a second *crack* as Murdock reapparated. In one remarkably swift motion, Jackson took Murdock’s hourglass from his hand and laid both his and Murdock’s on their sides in the middle of his desk. He stood back, looking severely at both hourglasses. The sand in Jackson’s hourglass was divided almost evenly between the two bulbs. Murdock’s hourglass still had nearly all of its sand in the top.

“I’m afraid, Mr. Murdock,” Jackson said, not taking his eyes off the hourglasses. “That your hypothesis has proven faulty. Do return to your seat, and thank you.”

Jackson looked up at the class and gestured at the hourglasses. “A difference of four seconds, give or take a few tenths. It appears that disappearance is not, in fact, instantaneous. But- and this is the very interesting part- it *is* instantaneous for the disappearator. What can Technomancy tell us about this? That is a rhetorical question. I will answer.”

Jackson resumed his pacing around the room as words began to scribble onto the chalkboard again. Around the room, students bent over their parchments. “Disapparation utilizes exactly the same methodology as vanished objects. The disapparator magnifies the distance between his or her own atoms, expanding themselves to such a degree that they become physically insubstantial, unseen, immeasurable, effectively everywhere. Having achieved everywhere-ness, the disapparator then automatically *reduces* the distance between his or her atoms, but with a new center point, determined by their mental landmarking immediately before disapparation. The wizard standing in London envisions Ebbets Field, disapparates- that is, achieves everywhere-ness- and then reapparates with a new solidity point at Ebbets Field. It is essential that the wizard make that predestination in his mind before disapparation. Can anyone tell me, using Technomancy, why?”

Silence. Then the girl named Gallows raised her hand again. “Because the process of apparation is instantaneous for the wizard?”

“Partial credit, Miss.” Jackson said, almost kindly. “Depending on distances, apparation takes time, as we have just seen, and time is not, relatively speaking, flexible. No, the reason that the wizard must firmly fix his destination before he disapparates is that, while the wizard is in the state of everywhere-ness, his mind is in a state of perfect hibernation. The time it takes to apparate is not instantaneous, but because the wizard’s mind is effectively frozen during the process, it seems to be instantaneous to him. Since a wizard cannot think or feel during the process of apparation, a wizard who fails to fix his solidity destination before disapparating... will never reapparate at all.”

Jackson frowned and scanned the class, looking for some sign that they’d grasped the lesson. After several seconds, a hand slowly raised. It was Murdock. His face was a pall of misery as he apparently struggled to arrange these radical concepts in his mind. Jackson’s bushy black eyebrows rose slowly.

“Yes, Mr. Murdock?”

“Question sir. I’m sorry. Where,” he coughed, cleared his throat, and then licked his lips. “Where is Ebbets Field?”

James met Zane and Ralph after lunch, all three having a short free period. With too much time to head directly to their next classes, but not enough time to go to their common rooms, they strolled aimlessly along the crowded halls near the courtyard, trying to stay out of the way of the older students and discussing their morning's classes.

"I'm telling you, old Stonewall has some wacky magical effect on the passage of time!" Zane told Ralph passionately. "I swear at one point I saw the clock actually move backwards."

"Well, I liked my teacher. Professor Flitwick. You've seen him around." Ralph said, amiably changing the subject.

Zane was undeterred. "Guy's got eyes in the back of his wig or something. Who'd've thought a school of witchcraft would be so sneaky?"

"Professor Flitwick teaches beginning spells and wandwork, doesn't he?" James asked Ralph.

"Yeah. It was really excellent. I mean, it's one thing to read about doing magic, but seeing it happen is something else. He made his chair float, books and all!"

"Books?" Zane interjected.

"Yeah, you know that stack of books he keeps on his chair so he can see over the desk? Must be a hundred pounds of them. He floated the chair right off the floor with them still on it, just using his wand."

"How'd you do at it?" Zane asked. James cringed, thinking of Ralph's ridiculous wand.

"Not bad, actually." Ralph said mildly. There was a pause as Zane and James stopped to look at him.

"Really. Not bad." Ralph repeated. "I mean, we weren't lifting chairs or anything. Just feathers. Flitwick said he didn't expect us to get it the first time. But still, I did as well as anybody else." Ralph looked thoughtful. "Maybe even a little better. Flitwick seemed pretty happy with it. He said I was a natural."

"You made a feather float with that crazy snowman-whisker log?" Zane asked incredulously.

Ralph looked annoyed. "Yes. For your information, Flitwick says that the wand is just a tool. It's the wizard that makes the magic. Maybe I'm just talented. Did that occur to you, Mr. Wand-Expert-All-of-a-Sudden?"

"Sheesh, sorry." Zane mumbled. "Just don't point that crazy snowman log at me. I wanna keep the same number of arms and legs."

"Forget it," James soothed as they started walking again. "Flitwick's right. Who cares where your wand came from? You really got the feather to levitate?"

Ralph allowed a small grin of pride. “All the way to the ceiling. It’s still up there now! I got it stuck in a rafter.”

“Nice.” James nodded appreciatively.

An older boy in a green tie bumped James, knocking him off the path and into the grass of the courtyard. He bumped into Ralph as well, but Ralph was as tall as the older boy, and rather wider. The boy bounced off Ralph, who didn’t budge.

“Sorry,” Ralph muttered as the boy stopped and glared at him.

“Watch where you’re going, first years.” the boy said coldly, glancing from James to Ralph. “And maybe you ought to be more careful who you allow yourself to be seen with, Deedle.” He stepped around Ralph without waiting for a response.

“Now *that’s* the Slytherin spirit you told me about on the train,” Zane said. “So much for ‘I expect we’ll all be friends’.”

“That was Trent.” Ralph said morosely, watching the boy walk away. “He’s the one who told me my GameDeck was an insult to my wizarding blood. Didn’t take him long to borrow it, though.”

James barely heard. He was distracted by something the boy had been wearing. “What’d his badge say?”

“Oh, they’ve all started wearing those.” Ralph said. “Tabitha Corsica was handing them out in the common room this morning. Here,” Ralph reached into his robes and produced a similar badge. “I forgot to put mine on.”

James looked at the badge. White letters on a dark blue background read “Progressive Wizarding Against False History”. A large red X repeatedly slashed itself across the words “False History”, and then faded out.

“They don’t all say that,” Ralph said, taking the badge back. “Some of them say ‘Question the Victors’. Others have longer sayings on them that didn’t make any sense to me. What’s an auror?”

Zane piped up. “My dad got called for auror duty once. He got out of it because he was on a shoot in New Zealand. He says if aurors got paid more we’d get better verdicts.”

Ralph looked bewildered at Zane. James sighed. “Aurors,” he said slowly and carefully, “are witches and wizards who find and catch dark witches and wizards. They’re sort of like wizarding police, I guess. My dad’s an auror.”

“Head of the Auror Department, you mean.” a voice said as a group passed. Tabitha Corsica was at the head of the group, looking back at James as she swept on. “But do pardon my interruption.” The others in the group looked back at James with unreadable smiles. All of them were wearing the blue badges.

“Yeah,” James said, loudly but rather uncertainly. “He is.”

“Your dad’s chief of the wizard cops?” Zane asked, glancing from the departing Slytherins to James. James grimaced and nodded. He’d had a chance to read another of the badges. It read “Say No to Auror Fear Mongering; Say Yes to Freedom of Magical Expression”. James didn’t know what any of it meant, but he had a bad feeling about it.

Zane suddenly turned and nudged Ralph with his elbow. “Better get that badge on, mate, or your House-buddies will think you’ve gone all soft on False History and the Auror Imperialists or whatever.”

James blinked, finally registering something Ralph had said a minute ago. “Did you say that your room-mate borrowed your GameDeck thing?”

Ralph smiled humorlessly. “Well, maybe not him. Somebody did. Not that many people knew about it, though. Unless they talked it up behind my back. All I know is it went missing from my bag right after I showed it to you guys. I suppose my House mates were just purging the room of counterfeit magic.” He sighed.

James couldn’t shake the nasty feeling that was cooling in his belly. It was all wrapped up in the sugary niceness of some of the Slytherins, and the odd badges. And now, one of them had taken Ralph’s weird Muggle game device. Why?

They were passing the Hogwarts trophy case when Zane, who had drifted ahead, called out. “Hey, club sign-up sheets. Let’s do something extra-curricular.” He leaned in, examining one sheet in particular. “Read the Runes! Predict your Fate and the Fates of your Friends! Learn the Language of the Stars’. Blah, blah. Constellations Club. Meets at eleven o’clock on Tuesdays in the west tower. Sounds to me like an excuse to be out late. I’m there.” He grabbed the quill which had been affixed to a shelf by a length of string, dipped it theatrically and scribbled his name on the sheet.

James and Ralph had caught up with him. Ralph leaned in, reading the sign-up sheets aloud. “Debate teams, Wizard Chess Club, House Quidditch teams,”

“What? Where?” Zane said, still holding the quill as if he meant to stab something with it. He found the parchment for the Ravenclaw Quidditch Team tryouts and began to sign his name. “I just gotta get on one of those brooms. What do you think my chances are, James?”

James took the quill from Zane, shaking his head in amusement. “Anything’s possible. My dad was the seeker for the Gryffindor team his first year. Youngest seeker in team history. He’s part of the reason they changed the rules. Used to be that first years couldn’t be on the team. Now it’s allowed, but really, really rare.” James signed his name to the bottom of the sheet for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Tryouts, he saw, were after classes the next day.

“Ralph, you going to sign up for the Slytherins? Come on! All your friends are doing it!” Zane leered at the bigger boy.

“Nah, I was never very good at sports.”

“You?” Zane cried heartily, throwing an arm rather awkwardly over Ralph’s shoulder. “You’re a brick wall! All you have to do is park yourself in front of the goal and the defense is all shored up! All they’d need is to find a broom that’ll hold you, you big lug.”

“Shut up!” Ralph said, twisting away from Zane’s arm, but smiling and turning red. “Actually I was thinking about signing up for the debate team. Tabitha thinks I’d be good on it.”

James blinked. “Tabitha Corsica asked you to be on the Slytherin debate team?”

“Actually,” Zane said, peering at the debate sign-up sheets. “debate teams aren’t divided by House. They’re just random teams A and B. Look, people from all different Houses are on each team. There’s even some of the visiting Alma Alerons on here.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and sign up, Ralph?” James asked. Ralph obviously wanted to.

“I don’t know. I might.”

“Oh, look, Petra’s on Team A.” Zane said. He began to sign his name again.

James frowned. “You’re joining the debate team just because Petra Morganstern is on it?”

“Can you think of a better reason?”

“You know,” James said, laughing. “Petra is going out with Ted, I think.”

“My dad says girls don’t know whether they like ice cream until they’ve tried every kind.” Zane said wisely, sticking the quill back into its holder.

Ralph furrowed his brow. “What’s that mean?”

“It means Zane here thinks he can give Ted a run for his money in the romance department.” James said. He both admired and worried about Zane’s lack of inhibition.

“It means,” Zane replied, “that Petra doesn’t know what she wants in a man until she’s had a chance to get to know as many men as possible. I’m thinking only of her best interests.”

Ralph studied Zane for a moment. “You do know you’re eleven years old, right?”

James stopped as Zane and Ralph began to walk on. His eye had been caught by a picture in the trophy case. He leaned in, cupping his hands around his face to block the glare of the sun. The picture was black and white, moving, as all wizard pictures did. It was his dad, younger, thinner, his black hair wild and unruly over the famous, characteristic scar. He was smiling uncomfortably at the camera, his eyes moving as if he were avoiding eye-contact with somebody or something outside the camera’s view. Next to the framed

photo was a large trophy made of silver and a sort of blue crystal that glowed with a shifting, curling light. James read the plaque below the trophy.

THE TRIWIZARD CUP
JOINTLY AWARDED TO HARRY POTTER AND CEDRIC DIGGORY,
HOGWARTS STUDENTS OF THE GRYFFINDOR AND HUFFLEPUFF HOUSES, RESPECTIVELY,
FOR WINNING THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT, WHICH WAS HELD UPON THESE GROUNDS
WITH THE COOPERATION OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE
DURMSTRANG ACADEMY AND THE SCHOOL OF BEAUXBATONS.

There was more, but James didn't read it. He knew the story. Harry Potter's name had been drawn as a competitor fraudulently, having been placed into the running by a dark wizard named Crouch. It had led to both Harry and Diggory being sent via Portkey to Voldemort's lair, resulting in the evil wizard's bodily return. No wonder his dad looked so uncomfortable in the photo. He had been under the legal age for the tournament, and had been the superfluous fourth contestant in a three wizard competition. He'd been in a room full of people who suspected him of cheating and dark magic, at best.

James glanced at the photo on the other side of the cup, the one of Diggory. His smile looked genuine and hearty compared to his dad's. James had never seen a photo of Diggory before, but it looked familiar nonetheless. He knew the story of Diggory, knew he had died next to his dad in the graveyard they'd been sent to, killed at the command of Voldemort. His dad rarely talked about that night, and James understood why, or at least thought he did.

He sighed, and then ran to catch up with Zane and Ralph.

Later that day, when James stopped in his room to swap books for his Defense Against the Dark Arts class, he found Nobby waiting for him, scratching the windowsill impatiently. James grabbed the rolled parchment off Nobby's leg and read it.

Dear James,

Your father and I are thrilled to hear you are settling in well, as we knew you would. Your uncle Ron says congratulations on becoming a Gryffindor, and we all concur. Can't wait to hear how

your first day's classes go. Also, I hope you hear about this from us first: your father has been asked to go to Hogwarts for a meeting with the American wizards about international security and other matters of "mutual interest". I'll be staying home with Albus and Lil, but your father looks forward to seeing you next week. Make sure you are eating more than pastries and meat pies and be sure to get your robes and yourself washed at least once a week (that was a joke. Actually, no it wasn't.)

Love and kisses,

Mum

James folded the note into the book he was carrying as he ran down the steps. The knowledge that he'd be seeing his dad next week had left him with mixed feelings. Of course he was excited to see him and to introduce him to his new friends. Still, he feared that the visit would also make the shadow of his famous father that much harder to escape. He was fleetingly thankful that Zane and Ralph were both Muggle-born, and therefore relatively ignorant of the exploits of his legendary dad.

As he joined the crowd of students filing into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, James saw another of the badges on a Slytherin's robe. "Progressive Wizards Against Magical Discrimination" it read. He felt a sort of aimless sinking feeling, and then he noticed the newspaper clipping tacked to the wall near the door. "Harry Potter to Join International Wizarding Summit" ran the headline. Below it, smaller type read: "Head Auror to Meet United States Representatives During Hogwarts Ceremony. Security Questions Prevail." Pinned to the newspaper clipping so that it obscured the photo of a smiling adult Harry Potter was another of the blue badges. "Question the Victors" it flashed.

"Come on," Ralph urged, joining James. "We'll be late."

As they navigated the crowded room and found two seats near the front, Ralph leaned toward James. "Was that your dad on that newspaper story?"

James had assumed Ralph hadn't noticed it. He glanced at Ralph as they sat down. "Yeah. Mum just wrote me about it. He'll be here beginning of next week. Big meeting with the Americans, I guess."

Ralph said nothing, but looked uncomfortable.

"You already knew about it, didn't you?" James whispered as the class quieted down.

"No," Ralph muttered, "at least, not specifically. My House mates have been talking about some sort of protest all day, though. Looks like it's about your dad, I guess."

James stared at Ralph, his mouth open slightly. So that's what Tabitha Corsica and her Slytherins were up to, behind all the friendly smiles and speeches. The Slytherin tactics had changed, but not their purpose. James pressed his lips into a grim line and turned to the front of the room as Professor Franklyn

approached the main desk. Professor Jackson was walking next to him, carrying his black leather case and talking in a low tone.

“Greetings, students.” Franklyn said crisply, “I suspect many of you have already met Professor Jackson. Please forgive the short delay.” Jackson eyed the seated students from over his shoulder, his face like granite. Zane’s nickname for the man did seem to be rather appropriate, James thought. Franklyn turned back to Jackson and spoke in a hushed voice. Jackson seemed discontent with what Franklyn was saying. He set his case down on the floor next to him, freeing his hand to gesture.

James looked down at the case. It was only a foot or two from where he sat in the front row. Jackson was never seen without the case, which was unremarkable in nearly every way apart from the fact that he guarded it so closely. James tried not to listen in on the conversation between the two professors, which was obviously meant to be secret. Of course, that made it all the more intriguing. He heard the words “grotto” and “Merlin”. Then, a third voice pierced the room.

“Professor Jackson,” the voice said, and while it wasn’t a loud voice, it rang with an air of understated power. James turned around to see who was speaking. Madame Delacroix was standing just inside the doorway to the room, her blind gaze hovering somewhere over everyone’s heads. “I thought you might like to know dat your class is awaiting you. You are always such a...” She seemed to search the air for the right word. “*stickler* for punctuality.” Her voice had a slow drawl that was somehow both French and Southern American. She smiled vaguely, then turned, her cane clicking the floor, and disappeared down the hall.

Jackson’s face was even harder than normal as he stared at the now empty doorway. He glanced pointedly at Franklyn, and then dropped his gaze, reaching for his case. He froze in mid-reach, and James couldn’t help glancing down toward the professor’s feet. The black leather case had apparently come slightly open when he’d set it down. Its brass catches glinted. No one else seemed to have noticed except for James and Professor Jackson. Jackson resumed reaching for his case, slowly, clicking it closed with one large, knobby-knuckled hand. James had only a narrow glimpse into the case. It appeared to be stuffed with folds of some rich, dark cloth. Jackson straightened, picking the case back up, and as he did so he glanced at James, his stony face grim. James tried to glance away, but it was too late. Jackson knew he’d seen, even if he didn’t know what it was.

Without a word, Jackson strode back up the aisle, moving with that purposeful, sweeping gait that looked so much like an old battleship under full sail, and then turned into the hall without looking back.

“Thank you for your patience.” Franklyn said to the class, adjusting his glasses. “Welcome to Defense Against the Dark Arts. By now, most of you know my name, and many of you, I assume, know something of my history. Just to get some of the obvious questions out of the way: Yes, I am *that* Benjamin Franklyn. No, I didn’t actually invent electricity for the Muggles, but I did give them a small push in the right direction. Yes, I was a part of the American Continental Congress, although for obvious reasons, I was not one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. At that time I used two different spellings of my name, only one of which was known to the Muggle world, which made it easier for me to know which

correspondences to open first. Yes, I realize my face graces the American one hundred dollar bill. No, contrary to popular myth, I do not carry sheets of uncut hundreds around to snip out and sign for admirers. Yes, I am indeed quite old, and yes, this is accomplished through means of magic, although I assure you that those means are a lot more mundane and prosaic than many have assumed. Emphatically no, I am not immortal. I am a very, very old man who has aged rather well with a little help. Does that cover most of the obvious questions?" Franklyn finished with a wry smile, surveying the remarkably full classroom. There was a murmur of assent.

"Excellent. Onward and upward then. And please," Franklyn continued, opening a very large book on his desk. "Let us avoid any 'it's all about the Benjamins' jokes. They weren't funny two hundred years ago and they are even less funny now, thank you."

Crossing the grounds on their way to dinner in the Great Hall, James and Ralph were passing Hagrid's cabin when they noticed the ribbon of smoke coming out of the chimney. James broke into a grin, called Ralph to follow, and ran up to the front door.

"James!" Hagrid bellowed, opening the door. He threw his arms around the boy, completely engulfing him. Ralph's eyes widened and he took a step backwards, looking Hagrid up and down. "So good to have a Potter back in school. How's your mum and dad and little Albus and Lilly?"

"Everybody's fine, Hagrid. Where've you been?"

Hagrid stepped out, closing the door behind him. They followed him as he crossed the grounds toward the castle. "Up the mountains meeting with the giants, that's where. Grawp and me, we go every year, don't we? Spreadin' goodwill and tryin' to keep them all honest, for whatever it's worth. Stayed a little longer this year on account of little Grawpie finding himself a girlfriend. Who's your mate, here, James?"

James, momentarily distracted by the thought of Hagrid's half-brother, who was a full giant, performing mating rituals with a mountain giantess, had completely forgotten about Ralph. "Oh! This is my friend Ralph Deedle. He's a first year, like me. Hagrid, are you telling us Grawp's in love?"

Hagrid grew vaguely misty. "Aww, it's sweet to see the little fellow and his lady friend together. Why, they're both just as happy as a pair of hippogriffs in a henhouse. Giant courtships are very delicate things, you know."

Ralph was having some difficulty keeping up with the conversation. "Grawp, your brother, is a giant?"

"Well, sure." Hagrid boomed happily. "He's only a little one. Sixteen feet or so. You should see his lady friend. She's from the Crest-Dweller's tribe, twenty-two feet if she's an inch. Not my type of girl, o'

course, but Grawpie's just smitten by her. Not surprising, really, since the first step in any giant courtship is smiting the mate over the head with a big hunk of tree trunk. She laid the little fellow right out cold for the best part of a day. After that, he's been as google-eyed as a pup."

James was afraid to ask, and suspected he knew the answer. "Did Grawp bring his girlfriend back home with him?"

Hagrid looked taken aback. "Well, sure he did. This is his home, now, isn't it? He'll make a good wife of her, once they're done a-courting. She's made herself a nice little hovel up in the hills behind the forest. Grawp's there now helping her settle in, I expect."

James tried to imagine Grawp helping a twenty-two foot giantess "settle in", but his exhausted imagination shut down. He shook his head, attempting to clear it.

"I hear your Dad's coming in for a meeting next week, James." Hagrid said as they entered the shadow of the main gates. "Having a meeting of the minds with the muckety-mucks from across the pond, eh?"

James puzzled over Hagrid's terminology. "If you say so,"

"Ahh, it'll be nice to have your Dad over for tea again, just like old times. Only without all the secrecy and adventure. Did I tell you about the time your dad and Ron and Hermione helped my Norbert escape?"

"Only about a hundred times, Hagrid." James laughed, pulling open the door of the Great Hall. "But don't worry, it changes a little every time I hear it."

Later, when dinner was almost over, James approached Hagrid where he thought they could have a more private conversation. "Hagrid, can I ask you a, sort of, official question?"

"O' course you can. I can't guarantee I'll know the answer, but I'll do my best."

James glanced around and saw Ralph sitting at the Slytherin table on the edge of Tabitha Corsica's group. She was talking seriously, her pretty face lit in the candlelight and the deepening light of the dusky ceiling. "Do people ever get, I don't know, sorted wrong? Is it possible that the Hat could make a mistake and put somebody in the wrong house?"

Hagrid sat down heavily on a nearby bench, making it groan appreciably. "Well, I can't say as I've ever heard of it happ'nin before," he said. "Some people may not like where they're placed, but that doesn't mean it's not a good fit. It might mean they just aren't happy with who they really are. What is it you're worried about, James?"

"Oh, it's not me I'm thinking of," James said hurriedly, taking his eyes off Ralph so as not to implicate him. "It's just a, sort of, you know, general question. I was just wondering."

Hagrid smiled crookedly and clapped James on the back, making him stumble half a step. “Just like your Dad, you are. Always lookin’ out for other people when you ought to be watching your own step. It’ll get you in hot water if you aren’t careful, just like it did him!” He chuckled, making a sound like loose rocks in a fast river. The thought seemed to bring Hagrid a great deal of hearty pleasure. “Nah, the Sorting Hat knows what it’s up to, I expect. Everything’ll come out all right. You wait and see.”

But as James walked back to his table, making eye contact with Ralph for a moment as he passed the Slytherins, he wondered.