



16. DISASTER OF THE MERLIN STAFF

The next morning, James, Ralph and Zane entered the Great Hall for breakfast and headed purposefully toward the far end of the Gryffindor table.

"Are you sure about this?" Ralph asked as they crossed the Hall. "We can't go back after this, you know."

James pressed his lips together but didn't answer. They crowded in with Noah, Ted and the rest of the Gremlins, all of whom were seated conspicuously in a tight knot.

"Ah, the very man," Ted announced as James squeezed between him and Sabrina. "We were just taking bets on why you asked all of us to meet you for breakfast. Noah thinks you want to officially join the ranks of the Gremlins, in which case we've prepared a series of grueling challenges for you to complete. My favorite is the one where you don Sabrina's old Yule gown and run through the school singing the Hogwarts tribute as loud as you can. There's plenty more, although Damien's challenges tend to involve too many slugs and mustard for my taste."

James grimaced. “To tell you the truth, the reason I asked to talk to all of you is that Ralph, Zane and I have something we need to ask of *you*.” To their credit, none of the Gremlins seemed surprised. They simply leaned in a little as they continued to eat. James didn’t exactly know where to begin. He had awoken that morning with the simple realization that, on their own, he, Ralph and Zane would not succeed in capturing the Merlin staff in one day. They had no plan. The portrait of Snape had been some help, but Snape didn’t even believe that Tabitha Corsica had the staff. So who could they turn to? He acted on his first impulse. He could ask the one group of people in all the school who were experts in the subtle arts of chaos and tomfoolery. It might take too long to explain everything to Ted and his fellow Gremlins, and even if he could, they still might not agree to help, but it was his best, last hope. James sighed hugely and stared at his glass of pumpkin juice. “We need your help to... to *borrow* something.”

“*Borrow* something?” Noah repeated, his mouth full of toast. “What? Money? A cup of sugar? A decent haircut? Doesn’t sound like you need us, exactly.”

“Quiet, Metzker,” Ted said mildly. “What is it you want to ‘borrow’, James?”

James took a deep breath and then simply said it. “Tabitha Corsica’s broom.”

Damien coughed into his juice. All the other Gremlins glanced at James with widened eyes. All except Ted. “Whatever for?” Sabrina asked in a low voice. “Tonight’s the tournament match between Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Is that it? Are you trying to ruin Slytherin’s chances? I admit that there’s something highly suspect about that broom of hers, but cheating doesn’t exactly seem like your style, James.”

“No! It doesn’t have anything to do with the match,” James said, and then faltered. “It’s a lot to explain. And I’m not even allowed to talk about some of it. McGonagall asked me not to.”

“Tell us as much as you can, then,” Petra said.

“All right. Zane, Ralph, help me out. Fill in any bits I miss. It’s going to sound pretty mad, but here goes.” Between the three of them, they explained the entire story of the Merlin Conspiracy, from the first glimpse of the shade of Madame Delacroix on the lake to the adventure at the Grotto Keep to Ralph and James’ mysterious confrontation with the creepy dryad demanding the Merlin robe. They had to back up, then, and explain how they’d come to capture the robe from Professor Jackson. James was worried that the story had become so fragmented that the Gremlins wouldn’t be able to follow it. Ted listened intently the entire time, simply eating and watching whoever was speaking. The rest of the Gremlins asked clarifying questions and responded with a mixture of skepticism, awe and excitement.

“You’ve been working this whole plot out all year and you’re only now telling us about it?” Damien asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Like I said, McGonagall warned us not to tell anybody about the Grotto Keep,” James said sincerely. “And we were worried that you wouldn’t believe the rest of it, anyway. We had a hard time believing a lot of it ourselves. For a while, at least. So, what do you think?”

"I'm confused," Sabrina said, frowning. "The whole thing seems pretty patched together. It's one thing to shoot off Weasley fireworks during the debate, but it's something else entirely to go and steal the broom of one of the most prominent, and frankly scary witches in the school. That's thievery, that is."

"It's only thievery if what we're saying isn't true," Zane reasoned. "If Tabitha's broom *is* the Merlin staff, then it isn't hers, really. I don't know whose it is, but no matter what, *she* had to have stolen it somehow herself."

Damien didn't seem convinced. "Even if she did, we'd be the only ones who knew that. If she hauls us all into the Headmistress' office claiming we stole her broom, what would we say? It's all right because she stole the broom herself from somebody, we don't know who, and besides, the broom is really the magic staff of the most powerful wizard ever, so we were really just doing the world a favor taking it out of Corsica's hands? *That'll* fly like a dead owl."

"Well, why wouldn't it?" Ralph interjected. "If it's true, it's true."

"And that came from the mouth of a Slytherin," Noah said, grinning crookedly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ralph said, firming his jaw.

James shook his head. "It's all right, Ralph. He's ragging you. The point is, yes, even if it is true, we might not be able to prove it. I won't tell you we might not get in trouble over this. I can only tell you that if it *is* true, then being hauled to McGonagall's office and called a thief is the least of our worries. I can't ask any of you to get involved if you don't want to. It's risky. We could all get in loads of trouble. We could even fail despite our best efforts."

"Now wait a minute," Noah said, "this is the Gremlins you're talking about."

Petra sat up straight and looked around at the group. "The thing is, if James, Zane and Ralph are wrong, we'll know by tomorrow. If we did 'borrow' Corsica's broom, we could return it, somehow. Probably anonymously. No harm, no penalty. Everybody will just think it was a Quidditch prank, right? But, if this story is true, and the broom really is the Merlin staff, then nobody will be dragging anybody to the headmistress' office."

"Why not?" Sabrina asked, interested.

"Because Tabitha will have bigger fish to fry," Noah answered thoughtfully. "If she's part of some big Merlin conspiracy and she fails to come through with the staff, she'll be in some serious outs with her cronies. People like that don't tend to be very forgiving, you know. Why, we might never even see her again."

"One can only hope," Petra muttered.

Ted stirred. “Look here, all of you. This is all well and good, but as far as I’m concerned, there’s only one thing to decide. Can we trust James? I don’t know Zane and Ralph here all that well, but I grew up with James. He may have sometimes been an obnoxious little squitter, but he’s always been honest. And besides, he’s the son of my Godfather. You remember that guy, don’t you? I’m willing to take a little risk for him. Not just because he’s family, but because he’s a Potter. If he says there’s a battle worth fighting, I’m inclined to believe him.”

“Well said, mate,” Noah said gravely, slapping Ted on the back. “And besides, let’s not forget that this does have the fringe benefit of pulling one over on Tabitha Corsica.”

“And perhaps balancing out tonight’s Quidditch match,” Sabrina admitted.

“And maybe we could somehow snatch her broom when she’s nice and high in the air!” Damien grinned nastily.

“That’s what I said!” Zane exclaimed.

“You’re both mad,” Petra said reproachfully. “You’re as bad as she is.”

“We don’t want to *kill* her,” Zane replied in a wounded voice. “We just want to see her drop a few hundred feet in terror. Ridcully would levitate her at the last moment, just like the Ralphinator did for James. Honestly, you must think we’re monsters.”

“So are we all agreed, then?” Ted asked the group. Everyone nodded and murmured assent.

“That’s wonderful and all,” Ralph said, “but how are we going to do it?”

Ted leaned back and stared up at the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall, stroking his chin. Slowly, he smiled. “Does anyone know what the weather is supposed to be like tonight?”



There was very little that the group needed to do to prepare. After lunch, Sabrina and Noah headed off to the basements to talk to the house elves. James and Ted, both of whom had an afternoon free period, spent some time in the library studying a collection of gigantic books about atmospheric spells and weather charms.

“This is Petra’s thing, really,” Ted lamented. “If she wasn’t busy all afternoon with divination and runes, we’d be a lot better off.”

James looked over their notes. “Looks like we’ve got what we need, though, doesn’t it?”

“I guess,” Ted replied airily, flipping a few huge pages noisily. A minute later, he looked up at James. “It was really tough for you to ask for help, wasn’t it?”

James glanced at Ted and met his eyes, then looked out a nearby window. “A little, yeah. I didn’t know if I’d be able to explain it. I wasn’t sure any of you would believe it.”

Ted furrowed his brow. “Is that all?” he prodded.

“Well...” James began, then stopped. He fiddled with his quill. “No, I guess not. It just seemed like... like something I was supposed to do on my own. I mean, with Zane and Ralph’s help, sure. They were along with the whole thing from the start. But still. I kind of figured that, between the three of us, we’d be able to manage. We’d work it out. It felt a little like...” He stopped, realizing what he was about to say, surprised by it.

“Like what?” Ted asked.

James sighed. “Like a failure. Like if the three of us couldn’t do it on our own, we’d failed, somehow.”

“The three of you. Like your dad and Ron and Hermione, you mean.”

James glanced at Ted sharply. “What? No... no,” he said, but suddenly he wasn’t sure.

“I’m just saying,” Ted replied. “It makes sense. That’s how your dad did it. He was a big one for taking on all the responsibilities of the world and not sharing the load with anyone else. He and Ron and Hermione. There were always loads of people around who were ready and willing to help, and sometimes they did, but not until they’d pretty much forced themselves into the action.” Ted shrugged.

“You sound like Snape,” James said, keeping his voice level. He felt uncomfortably vulnerable all of a sudden.

“Well, maybe Snape’s right, sometimes,” Ted said mildly, “even if he was an oily old humbug most of the time.”

“Yeah, well, blast him,” James said, surprised to feel a prickle of tears. He blinked them away. “He was a load of help, wasn’t he? Sneaking around, working both sides, never making it clear to anybody where his loyalties really lay until it was too late. Can’t really blame my dad for not trusting him, can you? So I don’t trust him either. Maybe my dad did do most stuff with just aunt Hermione and uncle Ron. That was all he needed, wasn’t it? They won. He’d found two people he could trust with everything. Well, I found

them, too. I've got Ralph and Zane. So maybe I thought I could be as good as Dad. I'm not, though. I needed some help." There was more James meant to say, but he stopped, uncertain if he should continue.

Ted looked at James for a long, thoughtful moment, and then leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. "Tough thing living in the shadow of your dad, isn't it?" he said. James didn't reply. A moment later, Ted went on. "I never knew my dad. He died right here, on the school grounds. He and Mum both. They were in the Battle of Hogwarts, you know. You'd think that it would be hard to feel resentful of people you never knew, but you can. I resent them for dying. Sometimes I resent them for being here at all. I mean, what were they thinking? Both of them rushing off into some big battle, leaving their kid at home. You call that responsible? I sure don't." Ted looked out the window, as James had done a minute earlier. Then he sighed. "Ah well, most of the time, though, I'm proud of them. Somebody once said, if you don't have something worth dying for, you aren't really living. Mum and Dad had something worth dying for, and they did. I lost them, but I got a legacy out of it. A legacy is worth something, isn't it?" He looked across the table at James again, searching his face. James nodded, unsure what to say. Finally Ted shrugged a little. "The reason I bring it up, though, is my dad, he left me something else."

Ted was quiet for almost a minute, thinking, apparently debating with himself. Finally he spoke again. "Dad was a werewolf. I guess it's as simple as that. You didn't know that, did you?"

James tried to keep his face from showing it, but he was quite shocked. He knew there had been something secret about Remus Lupin, something that had never been explained to him, or even mentioned outright. All James knew for sure was that Lupin had been close friends with Sirius Black, James Potter the first, and a man named Peter Pettigrew that had eventually betrayed them all. James knew that Lupin had come to teach at Hogwarts when his dad was in school, and that Lupin had taught his dad how to summon his Patronus. Whatever the secret of Remus Lupin's past, it couldn't have been anything terribly serious, James had reasoned. He had thought perhaps Ted's Father had been in Azkaban for a while, or that he had once flirted with the dark arts when he was young. It had never crossed James' mind that Remus Lupin might have been a werewolf.

Despite James' attempt to mask his shock, Ted saw it on his face and nodded. "Yeah, quite a secret, that was. Your dad told me the whole story himself a few years back, when I was old enough to understand it. Grandmum never talks about it at all, even now. I think she's afraid. Not so much of what was, but... well, what could be."

James was a little afraid to ask. "What could be, Ted?"

Ted shrugged. "You know how it is with werewolves. There're only two ways to become one. You can get bitten by one, or you can be born of one. Of course, nobody really knows exactly what happens when only your mum or dad is a werewolf. Your dad said that my dad was pretty upset when he found out Mum was going to have a baby. He was scared, see? He didn't want the kid to be like him, to grow up an outcast, cursed and hated. He thought he never should've even married my mum, because she wanted babies, but he was afraid to pass on the curse to them. Well, when I was born, I guess everybody breathed a big sigh of

relief. I was normal. I got my mum's metamorphmagus thing, even. They tell me I was always changing my hair color as a baby. Got no end of laughs about that, Grandmum says. I can still do it today, and a few other things, too. I usually don't, though. Once you get known for stuff like that it's hard to be known for much else, if you know what I mean. So I guess Dad died feeling a bit better about having me, then. He died knowing I was normal, more or less. I'm glad of that." Ted was staring out the window again. He took a deep breath, and then looked back at James. "Harry told me how your Grandfather James, Sirius Black and Pettigrew used to run with my dad when he changed, how they'd change into animal forms and accompany him around the countryside under the full moon, protecting him from the world and the world from him. I even started thinking it was all sort of adventurous and romantic, like those dopey Muggles who read those werewolf stories where the werewolves are all handsome and seductive and mysterious. I started almost wishing I *had* got the werewolf thing after all. And then..." Ted stopped and seemed to wrestle with himself for a moment. He lowered his voice and went on. "Well, the thing is, nobody really knows how all this werewolf stuff works, do they? I never gave it a second thought. But then last year... last year I started having insomnia. No big deal, right? Except it wasn't any normal insomnia. I couldn't sleep, but not because I wasn't tired, exactly. I was... I was..." He stopped again and leaned back in his chair, staring hard at the wall by the window.

"Hey," James said, feeling nervous and embarrassed, although he didn't quite know why. "You don't have to tell me. Forget it. No problem."

"No," Ted said, returning his gaze to James. "I do need to tell you. As much for me as for you. Because I haven't told anybody else yet, not even Grandmum. I think if I don't tell somebody, I'll go nutters. See, I couldn't sleep because I was so *hungry*. I was starved! I lay there in bed the first time it happened telling myself that this was just crazy. I'd had a nice big dinner and everything, just like normal. But no matter what I told myself, my stomach just kept telling me it wanted food. And not just anything. It wanted meat. Raw meat. Fresh-off-the-bone, meat. You see what I'm getting at?"

James understood. "It was..." he began, and then had to clear his throat. "It was a full moon?"

Ted nodded grimly, slowly. "Eventually, I got to sleep. But since then, it's gotten worse. By the end of last school year, I finally started sneaking down to the kitchens below the Great Hall, where all the elves work. They have a big meat locker down there. I started to... well, you know. I ate. It tends to be a bit of a mess." Ted shuddered, and then seemed to shrug it off. "Anyway, the point is, obviously I didn't completely skip the whole werewolf thing. My dad gave me his own shadow to live in, didn't he? I don't blame him for it. For all I know, this is the worst it'll ever get. And this isn't all that bad. Helps me bulk up for Quidditch season, at least. But... it's scary, a little. I don't know how to manage it yet. And I'm afraid to tell anyone about it. People..." Ted swallowed and looked hard at James. "People don't respond well to werewolves."

James didn't know whether to agree with that or not. Not because it was untrue, but because he wasn't sure Ted needed any more affirmation of it. "My dad could help you, I bet," James said. "And me, too. I'm not afraid of you, Ted, even if you are a werewolf. I've known you my whole life. Maybe we could,

you know, work it out like your dad and his mates did. He had *his* James Potter to help him, and you have yours.”

Ted smiled, and it was a huge, genuine smile. “You’re a brick, James. I’d hate to have to eat you. Learn how to turn yourself into a giant dog, like Sirius did, and maybe being a werewolf wouldn’t be so bad after all, with you trotting along next to me. But I almost forgot why I brought this up at all.” Ted leaned forward again, his eyes serious. “You have the shadow of your dad to grow up in, just like me. But I can’t choose whether I’m like my dad or not. You can. It’s not a curse, James. Your dad’s a great man. Pick the bits of who he is that are worth being like, and be like them, if you want. The other parts, well, that’s your choice, isn’t it? Take it or leave it. Those are the places where you can choose to be even better. Your dad didn’t much ask for help, did he? But that’s not because he didn’t need it. The fact that you asked for help doesn’t tell me you’re worse than him. It tells me you learned something he never learned. That’s you being you, not just a copy of your dad. I think that’s pretty cool, if you ask me. And not just because it means I get to help pull a fast one on Tabitha Corsica.”

James was speechless. He simply stared at Ted, unsure what to feel or think, unsure if what Ted was saying was true or not. He knew only that it surprised him and humbled him, in a good way, to hear Ted say what he had. Ted closed the gigantic book in front of him with a loud clunk.

“Come on,” he said, standing and gathering the books together. “Help me get these to the common room so Petra can look them over before the match. She’s going to have to help me get this right or we’re doomed for sure. Dinner is in an hour, and after that we’re going to be pretty preoccupied for the rest of the night, if you know what I mean.”



The afternoon of the last Quidditch match of the season was cool and misty, covered with a veil of restless, grey clouds. Silent and unusually somber, the Gremlins trooped through the tunnel behind the statue of St. Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive. When they reached the steps that led up to the interior of the equipment shed, Ted slowed and tiptoed. By now, Ridcully had probably already retrieved the Quidditch

trunk from the shed, but it didn't hurt to be careful. Ted peered around the cramped space, saw only some dusty shelves and a few broken brooms, and then beckoned the rest to follow him up.

"It's all clear. We should be safe in here, now that Ridcully's been and gone. He's the only one that uses the shed."

Ralph climbed the steps and looked cautiously around. James remembered that Ralph hadn't been along the night he and the Gremlins had used this secret tunnel to go raise the Wocket. "It's a magic tunnel. It only works one way," he whispered to Ralph, "we can get back through it because it's the way we came, but anybody else would just find the inside of the equipment shed."

"Cool," Ralph breathed meaningfully. "That's good to know."

James, Ralph and Sabrina pressed against the rear of the shed to peer through the single, grimy window. The Quidditch pitch lay behind the shed, and they could clearly see three of the grandstands, already mostly filled with banner-waving students and teachers, all bundled against the unseasonable chill. The Ravenclaw and Slytherin teams were gathering along opposite sides of the pitch to observe their captains' shaking hands and listen to Ridcully's traditional recital of the basic rules of play.

"I forgot all about this," Sabrina said quietly. "The whole hand-shaking thing. That Zane is a pretty sharp fellow."

James nodded. It had been Zane's idea to stage the broom caper during the opening moments of the match, in those few minutes when both teams came out of their holding pens beneath the grandstands to watch the opening ritual. It was a genius idea, because it was the only time when the teams' brooms were separated from their owners, left behind in the holding pens until the teams collected them for their big flying introductions.

"It's time," Ted said, tapping James once on the shoulder. "There's Corsica already."

James swallowed past a lump in his throat that felt like a marble. His heart was already pounding. He pulled the invisibility cloak out of his backpack, shook it open and threw it over his and Ralph's heads. As they neared the door of the shed, Petra whispered harshly, "I can see your feet. Ralph, duck down some more." Ralph hunkered and James saw the edge of the cloak meet the ground around his feet.

"Stay low and move fast," Ted instructed. He turned and peered between the planks of the door. The equipment shed was positioned at a corner of the pitch, just inside the magical boundary erected by the match official. The door faced away from the pitch, visible only to the Slytherin grandstands right next to it.

"Looks clear enough," Ted said, his face pressed to the cracks in the door. "Let's just hope everybody's looking at the pitch and not this shed." With that, he pushed the door open and stepped aside. James and Ralph shuffled through and James heard the door clunk shut behind them.

The wind was shifty and unpredictable. It barreled across the pitch and swatted restlessly at the invisibility cloak, flapping it about the boys' legs.

"Somebody's going to see my feet," Ralph moaned.

"We're almost there already," James said under the noise of the crowd. "Just stay close and keep down."

Through the transparent fabric of the invisibility cloak, James could see the dark mouth of the doorway into the Slytherin holding pen. The great doors were swung wide open, latched to the walls of the grandstand to keep them from blowing shut. The Slytherin players were lined up along the pitch on the other side of the doorway, close enough that a careless word or a flicker of their shoes might be noticed. James held his breath and resisted the urge to run. Slowly, the two boys sidled past the nearest Slytherin player, Tom Squallus, and slipped into the shadow of the doorway. Inside, the wind fell away and the cloak hung still. James let his breath out in a careful hiss.

"Come on," he whispered almost soundlessly, "we don't have much time."

James knew what the Gremlins were planning, even though he wasn't going to see any of it. Zane, who was watching along with his teammates on the Ravenclaw side of the pitch, told him all about it later. As Tabitha and Gennifer Tellus, the Ravenclaw Captain, walked to meet Ridcully at the centerline of the pitch, a strange sound began to build in the air overhead. All day, the sky had been low and sluggish, packed with grey clouds, but now, as the spectators and players glanced up, the clouds had begun to circle ponderously. There was a bulge in the clouds directly over the pitch, spiraling in on itself and lowering even as the crowd watched. The general noise of the assembly quieted, and the sound of the clouds in that silence was a deep, vibrating groan, long and menacing. With only his eyes, Zane glanced toward the equipment shed at the far corner of the pitch. He could just see the shapes of Ted and Petra, ducked low in the corners of the tiny window, their wands raised, teasing the cloud shapes. He smiled, and then, when the timing was perfect and the entire pitch had fallen silent, he called out across the pitch, "Quidditch is never called on account of weather, right Gennifer?"

There was a nervous ripple of laughter across the nearer grandstands. Gennifer glanced at Zane for a moment, then looked back up at the funnel lowering over her. As a Gremlin, Ted had told her of their plan, but Zane could tell that her nervousness wasn't hard to fake. Neither Ridcully nor Tabitha Corsica seemed prepared to move. Corsica merely looked up at the clouds, her hair whipping wildly around her face, her wand visible in her hand. Ridcully's expression seemed to be one of grim determination.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Damien's voice echoed throughout the grandstands from his place in the announcer's booth, "We seem to be experiencing some sort of highly localized weather phenomenon. Please stay in your seats. You are probably safe there. Those on the field, please remain where you are. Cyclones cannot see you if you don't move."

In the crowd, someone shouted out, "That's dinosaurs, you crazy fruitbat!"

“Same concept,” Damien answered in his amplified voice.

Sabrina and Noah darted out of the equipment shed, ducking against the swirling winds. They scurried toward the tiny concessions area built into the base of the Hufflepuff grandstand. The counter was manned by Hufflepuff students, but the food itself was prepared by elves in a kitchen near the back. Noah and Sabrina headed along the side of the grandstand and stopped at an open doorway.

“Hey, you fellows see what’s going on out here?” Sabrina yelled over the growing noise of the cyclone. “Weather’s getting pretty foul, isn’t it?”

A grumpy looking elf in the back of the kitchen lowered his pipe. “And what do you want we’s to do about it, eh? You wants we should shoot a blast of storm-calming pixie-dust out our ears, maybe?”

“I was just thinking about section fifty-five, paragraph nine of the Elves of Hogwarts Coalition Agreement,” Noah yelled, hunkering in the doorway. “Says elves are responsible for securing the grounds during inclement weather. Getting pretty inclement out here, I’d say. Maybe you’d like Sabrina and me to go shut and lock the holding pen doors for you until this blows over? Come on Sabrina.”

The elf stuffed his pipe into the knot of his napkin loincloth and jumped forward. “Never you mind that, now!” He turned and called into the depths of the kitchen. “Oi! Peckle! Krung! Seedie! We got a job, we does. Let’s get a move on.”

The four elves bustled past Sabrina and Noah. The grumpy elf called back over his shoulder as they went, “Much obliged, master and mistress. Enjoy the match, now.”

As the elves scurried through the wind toward the holding pen doors, the cyclone finally touched the pitch. It licked across the centerline, twenty feet to Tabitha Corsica’s right, and for several moments she watched it, fascinated. Many people commented later that, impressive as it was, it was certainly the smallest cyclone they had ever seen. The grass where it touched down tossed wildly, but the power of the tornado dropped off significantly after a hundred feet or so, so that those in the grandstands were relatively unaffected. Gennifer Tellus turned and ran to the sidelines to join her team. Ridcully didn’t seem to notice. Still standing in the center of the pitch next to him, Tabitha Corsica fingered her wand and glanced around, now ignoring the writhing cyclone. She seemed to be looking for something.

In the holding pen deep beneath the Slytherin grandstands, James and Ralph heard the noise of the cyclone and the creaking of the grandstand as the wind pressed against it.

“Which one is it?” Ralph asked as James whipped the cloak off them. “There’re so many of them!”

James pointed past the row of broomsticks leaning against the lockers. There, in the corner farthest from the door, a broom hung in the air as if awaiting its rider.

“That’s got to be it,” he said, darting toward it. They stopped, one on either side of it. Close up, the broom seemed to be vibrating or humming very slightly. A low, unsettling noise came from it, audible even

over the moan of the wind and the creak of the grandstands. “Grab it, then, James. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

James reached out and grabbed the broomstick, but the broom didn’t budge. He pulled it, then wrapped both hands around it and yanked. The broom was as immobile as if it had been buried in stone.

“What’s the problem?” Ralph moaned, glancing back toward the door. “If we’re still in here when they come back...”

“We have the invisibility cloak, Ralph. We can hide,” James said, but he knew Ralph was right. The holding pen was small and there were no obvious places to get out of the way, even if they couldn’t be seen. “The broom’s stuck, somehow. I can’t move it.”

“Well,” Ralph replied, gesturing vaguely, “it’s a broomstick. Maybe you’re supposed to ride it.”

James felt a sinking in his stomach. “I can’t ride this thing, even if I *could* get it to move.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not mine! I wasn’t all that great on the broom until I got my Thunderstreak, if you recall. We want to capture this thing, not pulverize it into a wall with me on it.”

“You’ve gotten better at it since then!” Ralph insisted. “Even before you got your Thunderstreak you were getting loads better. Almost as good as Zane. Go on! I’ll... I’ll hop on the back and throw the cloak over both of us!”

James dropped his hands and rolled his eyes. “Ralph, that’s completely crazy.”

Suddenly, a resounding boom echoed down the corridor leading to the pitch. It rattled the rafters, showering dust all around. Ralph and James both startled. Ralph’s voice was squeaky with fear. “What was that?”

“I don’t know,” James replied quickly, “but I think we just ran all out of options. Ralph, get ready to hop on.”

James swung his leg over the floating, gently humming broomstick and gripped the handle tightly with both hands. Slowly, he settled his weight onto the broomstick, letting it collect him.

A minute earlier, outside, Tabitha Corsica had spied something. Zane saw her gaze stop on the equipment shed. Somehow, she’d known the cyclone was suspicious and had identified the one place someone might hide and cast spells into the magical boundaries of the Quidditch pitch. Zane was prepared to bolt onto the pitch to head her off if she approached the shed. He was already concocting a haphazard plan to pretend to drag her to safety. She didn’t approach the shed, though. Zane saw her take one step in

that direction, and then glance aside at the elves closing and barring the doorways into the team holding pens. Tabitha turned on her heel and stalked purposely toward the door in the base of the Slytherin grandstands. Even if Zane ran full out, he'd barely beat her there. He simply had to hope that the elves would stick by their duties, regardless of what Tabitha said.

Noah and Sabrina had followed the elves to the Slytherin holding pen doors, watching from a distance as they swung them shut and threw the locking beam into place. Sabrina saw Tabitha striding across the pitch, her face grim and her wand out.

"Open those doors," Tabitha yelled, her voice firm but calm. She raised her wand hand, pointing it at the closed doorway.

"Very sorry, Miss," the grumpy elf answered, bowing slightly. "Coalition requirements. These doors must remain secure until such time as they can be opened without fear of danger or damage."

"Open them now or stand aside," Tabitha called. She was only thirty feet away from the doorway now, and Sabrina saw the look of murder on Tabitha's face. She'd blast those doors open with her wand and probably crush the poor duty-bound elves to paste between them and the wall. Obviously, Tabitha had guessed what was happening and knew that her broom was in jeopardy.

"Hey Corsica!" Sabrina shouted, launching herself forward, trying to get between Tabitha and the doors. "You summon this cyclone because you were too proud to forfeit to the Ravenclaws?"

Tabitha's eyes darted toward Sabrina, but her pace didn't change. Her wand hand swung swiftly and locked onto Sabrina, who stopped in her tracks. Noah jumped forward to pull Sabrina back but he was too late. Neither heard the curse Tabitha spoke, but they both saw the bolt of green light leap from her wand. It struck Sabrina square in the face, throwing her backwards into Noah. Both fell to the ground, their shouts drowned by the roar of the wind and the now yelling, confused crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Damien's voice echoed over the noise, "please let's give a big cheer for Mr. Cabe Ridcully, our beloved Quidditch official, who is currently trying to calm the cyclone with some sort of... well, ritualistic dance, as far as I can tell." Sure enough, Ridcully seemed to be dancing around the tornado as it curled over the pitch, throwing up a thick cloud of grit and dust. He pointed his wand at the funnel, but whenever he seemed to get a good aim at it, the funnel would shift, lunging towards him and forcing him to dance away. The crowd did indeed begin to cheer him, so that very few people noticed what was happening at the base of the Slytherin grandstands.

"Last chance," Tabitha called to the elves guarding the doorway. They both glanced at Sabrina, who was still collapsed atop Noah, her hands covering her face.

"Now listen here, Mistress," the grumpy elf began, but he was cut off by the bolt of green light that struck the closed doors. Both elves were thrown aside as the great wooden beam that barred the door exploded with a deafening boom and a shower of splinters. Tabitha hadn't slowed in her approach to the

door. She aimed her wand once more, ready to cast the spell that would throw the doors wide open. Then, suddenly, she stopped. She cocked her head, as if listening. Noah, struggling to get out from beneath the dazed Sabrina, heard it as well. Beneath the sound of the cyclone and the roaring grandstands, there was a sound like a single person yelling, and it was growing louder very quickly.

The doors to the Slytherin holding pen burst open, ripping completely off their hinges, as something rocketed through them from inside. Noah had the briefest glimpse of somebody bent low over a broom hurtling past Tabitha Corsica so fast that she was thrown off her feet. She landed in a graceless heap ten feet away. The voice of the screaming rider thinned into distance as the broomstick streaked over the pitch, through the cyclone, and out the other side.

James clung to Tabitha's broomstick as tightly as he could. He'd left Ralph behind, having launched into an instant wild acceleration the moment he'd settled onto the broom. He felt the thundering shock as the broom rocketed through the cyclone, then he opened his eyes and pulled, trying to gain some control over the wildly careening broomstick. The Quidditch pitch wheeled sickeningly beneath him as the broom responded, fighting him but unable to resist the force of his lean. The Ravenclaw grandstand loomed ahead and James struggled to pull up. He roared over the crowd, which ducked in his wake, hats and banners flying up behind him. Damien was yelling something from the announcer's booth, but James couldn't hear it over the roar of the wind in his ears. He risked a glance behind him, fearing he might have hurt someone. There were no obvious injuries as far as he could see. When he turned forward, he was heading directly toward the Slytherin grandstands again, back the way he'd come. He leaned the opposite direction and pulled as hard as he could, driving the broom into a wild, banking turn. The Slytherin grandstands spun away. With a sense of wild triumph, James realized he was getting some control over the broomstick. He looked ahead to see where his turn was taking him and gasped. He barely had time to duck his head before socking through the open door of the equipment shed.

The broom seemed to move as if it had a mind of its own. It roared through the tunnel beyond the shed and the air of the confined space pressed hard against James' eardrums. When it reached the opening behind the pedestal of St. Lokimagus, it turned so hard, threading into the corridor, that it nearly threw James off.

The sense of speed was staggering as the broomstick careened through the halls. Fortunately, the majority of the school's population was out at the Quidditch pitch for the tournament match, leaving the corridors mostly empty. The broomstick banked and dipped into the chasm of the stairwells. It swooped under and over the staircases as they swung and pivoted, barely missing them, forcing James to duck and hug the broomstick as closely as he could. Peeves was near the bottom of the staircases, apparently drawing mustaches on some of the statuary. James saw him out of the corner of his eye, then, amazingly, Peeves was sitting on the broomstick in front of James, facing him.

"Naughty trickery this is, Potter boy!" Peeves shouted gleefully as the broom shot into a narrow hall of classrooms. "Is we trying to create some friendly competition with dear ol' Peeves? Hee hee!"

Peeves grabbed a passing chandelier and swung around it, leaving James and the broom to plunge on after him. James tried to steer, but it was no use. The broomstick was following its own definite, if maniacal course. It banked and dove down a flight of stone stairs into the elf kitchens. Unlike the rest of the school, the kitchens were crowded and bustling, filled with elves cleaning up after the evening meal. The broom darted between gigantic pots, forcing the elves to scramble like tenpins. There was a cacophony of crashing dishes and silverware, the noise of which fell away with horrible speed. The washrooms were next, stifling hot and noisy. The broom rocketed wildly through the machinery of the washers, diving through gigantic cog-wheels and under the arms of enormous, chugging pistons. James was horrified to see that the broom, apparently having reached a dead end, was barreling straight toward the stone wall at the end of the room. He was about to throw himself off the broom, hoping to land in one of the copper vats of suds and water, when the broom ticked slightly to the left and angled up. There was a door set into the wall, and James recognized that it was a laundry chute. He gritted his teeth and hugged the broomstick again. The broom shot into the chute, angling upwards so hard that James could barely keep his legs tucked in, and then there was only rushing darkness and pressure.

A pile of laundry met him halfway up the chute and James spluttered as the mass of cloth smothered him. He struggled to shake the clothes free, but couldn't risk letting go of the broomstick. The broom ducked again, and James could tell by the change in pressure and the coolness of the air that it had somehow taken him back outside again. All he could see through the mass of cloth was a faint pattern of flickering light as the broomstick banked and dove. James risked letting go with one hand. He flailed at the clothing wrapped around him, finally grabbing a handful and yanking it as hard as he could. The cloth came free, stunning him with a blurring tableau of light and wind. He had time only to recognize that somehow, incredibly, the broom was taking him back to the Quidditch pitch. The grandstands loomed ahead of him. At the base of the nearest one was a throng of people, many turning toward him, pointing and yelling. Then, with instant finality, the broomstick simply stopped moving. James shot off the end of the broom, and for what seemed like far too long a time he simply hurtled through the air unsupported. Finally, the ground claimed him with a long, rolling thud. Something in James' left arm popped unpleasantly and when he finally came to a stop, he found himself staring up into a dozen random faces.

"Looks like he'll be all right," one of them said, looking from him to someone standing nearby.

"More than he deserves," another person said angrily, frowning down at him. "Trying to ruin the match by stealing the Team Captain's broomstick. I never would have thought it."

"It's quite all right, really," another voice said from further off. James moaned and pushed himself up on his left elbow. His right arm was throbbing horribly. Tabitha Corsica stood twenty feet away, surrounded by a crowd of awed spectators. Her broom hung motionless next to her, exactly where it had stopped. She had one hand on it, gripping it easily. "We can surely forgive this kind of first year enthusiasm, although I myself am rather amazed at the lengths some will go to in the name of Quidditch. Really, James. It's just a game." She smiled at him, showing him all her teeth.

James flopped back into the grass, clutching his right arm next to him. The crowd began to break apart as Ridcully appeared, pushing his way through. The Headmistress and Professors Franklyn and Jackson were right behind him. James heard Tabitha Corsica talking loudly to her teammates as she headed back toward the pitch. “People think that because it’s Muggle made it must be a lesser broom, you see. But the magic of this is stronger than anything you’d find in a standard Thunderstreak, even one with the Extra-Gestural Enhancement option. This broom *knows* who its mistress is. All I had to do was summon it. Mr. Potter could hardly have known that, though. In a way, I feel sorry for him. He was just doing what he knew to do.”

McGonagall squatted down next to James, her face grave and full of consternation. “Really, Potter. I just don’t know quite what to say.”

“Broken ulna, Madam,” Franklyn said, peering at James arm through a strange device comprised of different sized lenses and brass rings. He folded it neatly and slipped it into his inner robe pocket. “I’d suggest the hospital wing for now and questions later. We have much more to attend to at the moment.”

“Quite right,” the Headmistress agreed, not taking her gaze from James. “Especially since I expect that Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant will be here within the next few hours. I must say, Potter, I am extremely surprised at you. To attempt something so puerile at such a time.” She stood, brushing herself off. “Very well, then. Mr. Jackson, would you escort Mr. Potter to the hospital wing, please. And if you would be so kind as to instruct Madam Curio that Mr. Potter is to be kept there overnight.” She fixed James with a steely stare as Jackson pulled him to his feet. “I want to know exactly where to find him when I wish to question him. And *no* visitors.”

“Rest assured, Madam Headmistress,” Jackson answered, leading James back toward the castle.

They walked the first five minutes in silence, then, when they entered the courtyard and the noise of the pitch died away, Jackson said, “I haven’t quite pegged you yet, Potter.”

The pain in James’ arm had receded to a dull throb, though it was still rather distracting. “Excuse me, sir?”

“I mean that I haven’t figured you out, yet.” Jackson said in a conversational voice. “You obviously know far more than a boy your age should, and somehow I don’t think that is merely because you are the son of the Ministry’s head auror. First you attempt to steal my case, and then tonight, you orchestrate this preposterous charade to steal Miss Corsica’s broom. And despite what everyone else might think, Potter,” he glanced aside at James as they entered the main hall, his dark brows lowering, “*I* know that you did not steal it in order to give the Ravensclaws a better chance in the tournament.”

James cleared his throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jackson wasn’t paying him any attention. “It doesn’t matter, Potter. Whatever you think you know, whatever it is you are up to, after tonight, it won’t matter one iota.”

James' heart skipped a beat, and then began to pound hard in his chest. "Why?" he asked, his lips strangely numb. "What's tonight?"

Jackson ignored him. He opened one of the leaded glass doors into the hospital wing and held it for James. The room was long and high, lined with crisply made beds. Madam Curio, who for rather obvious reasons was not a Quidditch fan, was seated at her desk in the rear corner listening to classical music on her wireless.

"Madam Curio, you probably know Mr. Potter, here," Jackson said, pressing James toward her. "He has somehow managed to break his arm at the Quidditch match despite the fact that he, himself, is not actually on either of the teams."

Madame Curio stood and approached James, shaking her head. "Hooligans. I'll never understand what it is about that sport that turns otherwise proper individuals into Neanderthals. What do we have here, then?" She lifted James' arm gingerly, feeling for the break. He hissed through his teeth when she found it. She clucked her tongue. "Nasty fracture, sure enough. Could have been worse, though, I'm sure. We'll have you fixed up in no time."

"Also," Jackson said, "I've been instructed by the headmistress to ask you to keep Mr. Potter here for the evening, Madam."

Curio didn't look up from her inspection of James' arm. "The Skelegro will take at least until tomorrow morning to complete its work, anyway. Still, this is minor enough. I might have sent him to his rooms with a splint."

"The headmistress wishes to question Mr. Potter, Madam. She desires that he be kept under supervision until then. It seems, I am afraid, that Mr. Potter is suspected to be involved in a very serious plot that could put this school at risk. I shouldn't say more, but if you chose to post some sentries at the doors to keep visitors out and Mr. Potter in, at least until tomorrow morning, I wouldn't think that was overdoing it."

"She didn't say any such thing!" James exclaimed, but he knew that his protest wouldn't help. In fact, the louder he protested, the worse it would probably look.

Curio gasped and straightened up. "Does this have anything to do with the intrusion of that horrible man on the premises yesterday? I've heard that he's some sort of Muggle newsperson, and that he's still here! It does, doesn't it?" She covered her mouth with her hand and looked from Jackson to James.

"Again, I really shouldn't say any more, Madam," Jackson replied. "Besides, Mr. Potter may end up being entirely exonerated. We shall see in time. At any rate," Jackson looked down at James and there was the faintest suggestion of a smile on one corner of his lips. "Until tomorrow morning, then, James."

He turned and stalked out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him.