



II. THE THREE RELICS

After the initial excitement of travel and arrivals, Christmas break at Grimmauld Place became rather humdrum. James introduced Ralph to everyone, and Ralph very shortly became simply one more of the throng of friends and family that crammed the house. On the Wednesday before Christmas, Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione arrived, along with their children Hugo and Rose. They were followed shortly thereafter by uncle Bill and aunt Fleur, Victoire's parents. James was very fond of them all, and even though the house was beginning to feel rather strained to capacity, he was thrilled they were staying over through the break.

"It's a good thing Mum and Dad are off with Charlie this year," Ron commented, lugging his and Hermione's luggage up the steps to their third-floor bedroom. "This place seems so much smaller than it did when we were kids."

"It's just you who's bigger, Ron," Hermione chided, elbowing him affectionately in the stomach. "You've got no room to complain."

"I'm not complaining. At least we get a room. If Percy was here he'd have to bunk in with Kreacher."

James and Ralph, along with James' siblings and cousins, spent their days by the fire, playing wizard chess with Uncle Ron, or roaming the nearby streets, performing last-minute errands and Christmas shopping with Ginny or Aunt Hermione. Fleur and Bill enlisted James and Ralph's help in picking out and transporting a Christmas tree, which had looked merely charmingly plump outside, but had taken up two-thirds of the main hall when they'd brought it in.

"Seems a shame to do it," Bill said, producing his wand and pointing it at the tree. "*Reducio!*"

The tree shrunk by a third, but managed to maintain its density, so that it ended up looking rather more like a Christmas bush than a tree. Ralph, James, Rose and Victoire spent most of the day before Christmas Eve stringing popcorn, decorating the tree, and wrapping presents. That night, Hermione gathered the entire household with the intention of bundling everyone up and going Christmas caroling. Neither Ron nor Harry, however, were particularly overjoyed about the idea.

"Give us a break, Hermione," Harry said, dropping into an easy chair by the fire, "We've been on our feet all day."

"Yeah," Ron chimed in, bolstered a bit, "It's just the start of the holiday. We haven't even had a chance to sit down yet, have we?"

"Ronald Weasley, you get your bottom into your coat and hat," Hermione replied, tossing Ron's things onto his lap. "We only get the whole family together once a year anymore, if we're lucky, and I'm not going to let you sit on your bum all night just as if you were at home. Besides," she added a bit truculently, "you said on the way here that you thought caroling sounded fun."

"That was before I knew you were serious," Ron muttered, climbing to his feet and shrugging on his coat.

"You, too," Ginny smiled, grabbing Harry's hand and pulling him out of the chair. "You can lounge around all Christmas day if you wish. Tonight we're going to have some fun, whether you like it or not."

Harry groaned, but allowed Ginny to work his coat onto him. She punched him playfully in the stomach and he grinned, grabbing his scarf. To Ron's and Harry's apparent annoyance, Bill was raring to go, performing scales in the hallway, his hand on his chest. Fleur, dressed as resplendently as her daughter, smiled adoringly at him. As they headed out the door, James heard uncle Ron mutter to his dad, "I swear he acts like that as much to spite us as to impress her."

The night had turned out so perfectly and quintessentially Christmas-like that James wondered if his mum and aunt Hermione had somehow bewitched it. Fat, silent snowflakes had begun to fall, muffling the distant city sounds and blanketing the grimy walls and sidewalks with sparkling white. Hermione passed out sheets of music, and then arranged everyone so that the youngest were in front and the oldest and tallest were in back. "If mum weren't still around," Ron said to Harry in a low voice, "I'd swear Hermione was channeling her." During a practice chorus, Hermione became annoyed at Ted, who insisted on singing

amusing variations of the lyrics, to the great delight of Albus and Hugo. Finally satisfied, she led the troupe through the streets surrounding Grimmauld Place, ringing doorbells and directing the choruses. Most of the Muggles who answered their doors stood and listened with something like strained amusement on their faces. Once, an old man with a large hearing aide yelled at them that he didn't support any charities except the Hortense Home for Feral Felines, and then slammed his door.

"McGonagall owes him a Christmas card, then," Ted said, barely missing a beat.

James waved a hand at Ralph before he could ask. "Animagus. I'll explain later."

Christmas morning dawned with dazzling brightness, the sun turning the snow-frosted windows into blinding tableaux. Ralph and James met Albus and Rose on their way down the steps to breakfast.

"It's no use," Rose said dolefully, "Mum swears she'll crucio anyone who tries to open a present before breakfast."

James blinked. "Aunt Hermione said that?"

"Well," answered Albus, "not in so many words. But she's really in a snit ever since she caught us using a pair of Uncle George's Z-ray spectacles on the presents to see what was in them. She just about turned dementor on him. It was scary!"

"Uncle George is here?" James asked, trotting down the rest of the stairs and heading for the kitchen. "Excellent!"

"Yeah, but he brought Katie Bell with him," Albus said, pronouncing the name with his most ingratiatingly snarky voice. Albus didn't so much disapprove of Katie Bell as he disapproved of anyone threatening to alter George Weasley's impish bachelorhood.

As James and Ralph turned the corner into the old kitchen, they heard George's voice saying, "That's the sort of publicity that has allowed triple W to grow to two locations and become the wizarding world's leading joke shop, you know. You can't turn down a primo show-stopper at a broadcast event like the debate. It's all about the spectacle."

Katie Bell, an attractive woman with long brown hair, stirred her tea. "You should've heard the way Myron Madrigal described it on the wireless," she said, stifling a smile.

Ted scowled, then his curiosity got the better of him. "What'd he say?"

"He called it 'a puerile display of monumental poor taste'." George said proudly, raising his juice glass in a toast.

"That's beautiful!" Ted grinned, clinking his glass to George's.

“James, good to see you!” George said, clapping his juice onto the table and patting the seat next to him. “Have a seat and tell us how the old alma mater is treating you.”

“Great,” James said, sitting down and grabbing a piece of toast. “George, this is my friend Ralph.”

“Oh we know all about you, don’t we?” George said, leaning toward Ralph and tapping the side of his nose. “Our man on the inside, eh? Infiltrating the slimy underbelly of the Slytherin war machine. Spying and sabotaging left and right, no doubt.”

Ralph rolled his eyes at Ted.

“I didn’t say anything,” Ted said primly. “I happened to mention to him that you were on team B, way back when we ordered our little surprise package. He figured out the rest on his own when he found out you were here.”

Ralph squirmed. “Well. That’s not really true, you know. I’m just a kid.”

“Never underestimate what a kid can do, Ralphie,” George said seriously.

“That’s right,” Katie nodded. “George and his brother Fred caused the best class disruption in Hogwarts history in the middle of the reign of Umbridge the Terrible.”

“Like I said, it’s all about the spectacle.” George said.

“With a little revenge thrown in,” Katie said, smiling.

“How dare you even suggest such a thing.”

Ralph and James exchanged looks.

James, Ralph, Ted and George were the last at the breakfast table. The younger siblings and cousins fairly drug them from the table, finally getting the entire household together for the opening of the presents.

“Didn’t you do like I told you?” George said, laughing as Albus pulled him into the parlor. “Open the presents in the middle of the night and then re-wrap them again with the *reparo* charm?”

“I *tried!*” Albus replied earnestly. “I nicked James’ wand and practiced on a box of biscuits. Couldn’t get it to work! Made no end of a mess. Mum just about thrashed me.”

“You nicked my wand!” James cried, lunging after Albus. “I’ll thrash you myself! Give it back!”

Hooting, Albus darted away with James in pursuit.

There was much yelling and shredding of paper, and James couldn’t help thinking that Christmas at Grimmauld place probably wasn’t much different than Zane’s description of his family Christmas in the States, hinkypunks and all. When the younger Weasleys and Potters had all opened their presents and

scampered off to enjoy them, the rest of the gifts were opened with a bit more reserve. Harry had gotten Ginny an unusual new cauldron, which she unwrapped and stared at rather blankly.

“It’s a Conjure-Pot,” he explained, a little defensively. “It makes dinner a snap! You just throw in a few ingredients each morning, whatever you have left lying around the cupboard. It doesn’t matter what. The Conjure-Pot figures out the best dish to make with it, prepares it and cooks it up during the day. We all come home at night and voila, mystery meal. Great for the working mum on the go.”

“At least that’s what the sign on the display at Tristan’s and Tupperworth’s said,” Ron remarked, grinning. Harry clipped him on the back of the head.

Fleur sniffed. “Where I come from, eet is considered improper for a man to buy cookery as a gift.”

“That’s because where you come from, my dear,” Bill said gently, “the men do most of the cooking.”

“Oh, just open the next one,” Harry said, annoyed.

Ginny’s next present turned out to be a pair of mer-pearl earrings, which went over much better. Ginny seemed simultaneously distraught and overjoyed by them.

“Harry! How did you pay for these? Mer-pearl! I never expected...!” Her eyes glittered as she blinked back tears.

“Just put them on,” Harry smiled. “If it makes you feel any better, they’re fake. Leprachaun-pearl. They came as a bonus gift with the Conjure-Pot.”

“No they didn’t,” she smiled, and kissed him.

Ron had gotten Hermione a small but apparently expensive bottle of perfume called *Whimsies’ Enchantment*, which Hermione was very pleased with. Ginny and Hermione had gone together to buy Harry and Ron tickets to the Quidditch World Cup.

“We knew you’d both been wanting to go for the past several years,” Hermione explained as Harry and Ron congratulated each other. “But you never think ahead to get advance tickets. We’ve got eight total tickets, so you can take the kids, if you wish. They’d love it. And your wives, of course, if you wished. It’s up to you.”

But Harry and Ron had fallen into a debate about what teams would be in the Cup and barely heard the last.

James opened his present and was surprised to see that his parents had gotten him a new broom.

“Wow,” he breathed, “a Thunderstreak! Mum, Dad, you got me a Thunderstreak?”

“Well,” Harry said slowly, “I knew you’d had some trouble getting started on the broom, but I spoke to your friend Zane and he said you were coming along really well. I thought you might like to practice on

your own broom. Those school brooms are too old. Slow, unwieldy, and the handling's gone all mushy. You try this out and I think you'll notice the difference straight off."

"Course, if you don't want it," George offered, "You could always trade with Ted. That old Nimbus of his may be slow as a flobberworm, but it has *loads* of antique value."

Ted hurled a ball of wrapping paper at George, hitting him square in the face.

James felt a little sorry for Ralph, who had not heard from his dad since the message that he'd be travelling over the holidays. Ralph shrugged it off, saying his dad had probably sent his Christmas gift to the school. James and Ralph were both surprised when Ginny handed Ralph a small wrapped package.

"It's not much," Ginny smiled, "but we thought you might enjoy it."

Ralph unwrapped the package and looked at it. It was a very dog-eared and dilapidated book, the words on the cover almost illegible with age. It was called *Advanced Potion Making*.

"That belonged to a great Slytherin, like you'll be, no doubt," Harry said somberly. "Frankly, I thought I'd lost it, but it turned up a few weeks ago. I didn't know what to do with it until you came for the holiday. Then, it just made sense that you should have it. Don't let professor Slughorn see it though. Just use it as a... reference."

Ralph flipped carefully through the old book. The margins were crammed with hand-written notations and drawings. "Who wrote all this stuff inside?"

"Doesn't really matter." Harry said cryptically. "You don't know him. Just take care of it, and be careful how you use some of the stuff in there. It can be a little... dodgy, sometimes. Still, it just seems right that it should be in the hands of a good Slytherin man. Happy Christmas, Ralph."

Ralph thanked Harry and Ginny, a bit puzzled at the serious looks both he and the book were getting. He recognized that, mysterious as the book was, it was apparently rather meaningful. He wrapped it in a piece of cloth Ginny gave him and placed it in the bottom of his trunk.

James was delighted when Neville and Luna Lovegood arrived that afternoon. The two had been seeing each other for the past few months, but James had heard his mum tell Andromeda Tonks that "it wasn't going anywhere". James couldn't guess how his mum knew such things, but he never doubted that she was right. For James' part, Neville and Luna seemed just a bit too brotherly and sisterly to be a couple.

After dinner, grandmum Weasley appeared in the fireplace to wish everyone a happy Christmas.

"We're having a perfectly delightful time here with Charlie," she said from the grate. "And Prague is just lovely. I think you boys need to have a talk with your father, though. He's gotten rather enamoured with the Muggle architecture here and is talking about staying on a few more weeks. He's become so

unpredictable now that he's retired from the Ministry. Oh, it is so difficult having you kids all over the world like this. How am I supposed to keep track of my grandbabies?"

"How are Charlie and Claire and the kids, then, Molly?" Hermione asked, gently steering the topic to pleasanter subjects.

"Quite well, although Charlie insists on taking little Harold and Jules to work with him on occasion. How these poor children can endure the sight of such creatures and not have constant nightmares is simply beyond me."

James, who'd met his younger cousins Harold and Jules a few times, knew that it was likely that they, in fact, might give nightmares to the dragons rather than the other way around.

Late that evening, as most of the household was beginning to drift to bed, James and Ralph found themselves seated near the fire with Luna Lovegood, who was telling them about her latest expedition into the Highland Mountains in search of the umgubular slashkilter.

"Still no positive identification," she said, "but I discovered a vast network of their tracks and leavings. Their diet seems to consist almost entirely of blusterwermps and figgles, so it's pretty easy to identify their dung by smell alone. Sort of pepperminty. Not at all unpleasant."

"Unglubulous... slashkillers?" Ralph attempted.

"Close enough," Luna said kindly. "They're a species of flightless raptor, distantly related to hippogriffs and octogators. I took a mold of one of their tracks and a stool sample from one of their leavings. Would you like to smell it?"

"Luna," James said, leaning forward in his chair and lowering his voice. "Can we ask you a question about something? I'd rather nobody else knew about it."

"I specialize in things nobody else knows about." Luna said mildly.

"I mean, I want to keep it sort of a secret."

"Oh." Luna said, her face placid. James waited, but Luna merely watched him, smiling politely. Luna, he recalled, occasionally had a rather unique approach to conversation. He decided to plow on.

"This isn't about slashkilters or wrackspurts or anything. Really, it'd be a better question for your dad, if he was still around, but I bet you know the answer, too. What can you tell us about... about Austramaddux and Merlinus Ambrosius?"

Luna was the only completely unshockable person James knew. She merely looked into the fire and said, "Ahh, yes, not exactly my specialty. A lifelong hobby of my father's, though. Austramaddux was the historian who recorded the last days of Merlinus and his promised return, of course. The subject of much speculation and intrigue for centuries, you know."

“Yeah,” James said. “We know. We read about him and the prediction of his return. What we’re wondering is how it could happen? What would it take?”

Luna looked thoughtful. “It’s a pity my father isn’t here. He could speak on the subject for days. He did once, in fact, at a gathering of alternative magical publishers and broadcasters in Belfast. Gave a speech on the implications of the Merlinus conspiracies and their hypothetical plausibilities, if I recall. It went on for three and half days, until he fell asleep at the podium. Actually, I think that he was asleep long before anyone realized it. He was a notorious sleep-talker. Gave more than a few of his speeches in a nightgown. Most people thought it was eccentricity, but I think he was just multi-tasking.” She sighed fondly.

James knew he wouldn’t have much time before someone else, George, or worse, his dad or mum, would come back into the room. “Luna, what did he say about it? Did he think Merlin’s return was possible?”

“Oh, he certainly did. Had a hundred theories about it. Hoped he’d live to see the day, in fact, although even he wasn’t any too sure that when Merlinus returned he’d be anything like what we’d call a good wizard. Wrote a whole series of articles for the Quibbler explaining the three relics and offering a hundred galleon reward for anyone with valid clues to their whereabouts.”

James tried not to interrupt Luna. “What are the three relics?”

“Oh,” Luna said, looking at him. “I thought you’d read about it?”

Ralph spoke up. “We did, but it didn’t say anything about any relics. It just said that Merlin would leave the world of men and return when the time was ripe for him, or something.”

“Ah, well, that’s the key, then, isn’t it?” Luna said placidly. “The relics determine when the time is ripe. Merlin’s three required magical elements, his throne, his robe and his staff. He left them in the charge of Austramaddux. According to the prediction, once the three relics are brought together again in a place called the Hall of Elder’s Crossing, Merlinus will re-appear to claim them.”

James gasped. *The Hall of Elder’s Crossing*, he thought, remembering the legend inscribed on the gate of the secret island. He felt his heart pounding and was sure Luna would hear it in his voice. He struggled to sound merely curious. “So, what became of Merlin’s three relics, then?”

“No one knows for sure,” Luna replied airily. “but my father had developed some pretty strong theories. According to legend, Merlin’s ceremonial black robe was made of incorruptible fabric, allowing it to survive eternally. It was supposedly used as a caul over the body of Kreagle, the first king of the wizarding world, in the belief that it would prevent corruption. Alas, no one knows the location of Kreagle’s tomb, its secret-keepers having been inhumed within it to secure its secrecy forever.” Ralph shuddered as Luna went on. “Merlin’s throne as advisor to the kingdoms of the Muggles was passed from regime to regime, always kept ready for the wizard’s return, until it was eventually lost in the mists of time. Some believe that it was

recovered by a wizarding king in the sixteen hundreds, and that it is stored today in the Ministry of Magic, forgotten in the endless vaults of the Hall of Mysteries. Finally,” Luna said, narrowing her eyes as she searched her memory, “The greatest of Merlin’s relics, his staff. Back then, wizards used staffs rather than wands, you know. Long sticks, often as tall as the wizard himself. Merlin’s was carved from the trunk of a rare talking knucklewood tree. It is said that he could still make his staff speak with the voice of the dryad that had given it. Austrammaddux kept the staff himself, claiming to be its sole keeper until the day of Merlin’s returning. He hid it, and the secret of its location is said to have died with him.”

“Wow,” Ralph said in a low voice.

“But still,” James said, “say someone could get all the relics back together again. Where is this Hall of Elder’s Crossing supposed to be?”

“Again, no one knows,” Luna replied. “Austrammaddux speaks of it as if he expects his readers to know of it, as if it were a well-known place. Perhaps it was then, but it has been completely lost to us now.”

“But your father believed it would be possible to bring Merlinus back? He thought it could happen?” James prodded.

For the first time, Luna’s face became serious. She looked at James. “My father believed in quite a wide variety of things, James, not all of them technically consistent with reality. He did believe in the return of Merlinus. He also believed in the healing power of nargle warts, the fountain of pleasing breath, and the existence of an entire subterranean civilization of half-human creatures he called Mordmunks. In other words, just because my father believed it, that hardly makes it true.”

“Yeah, I guess.” James said, but distractedly.

Luna went on. “No wizard has ever overcome death. Many have cheated it for a while, using arts ranging from the creative to the questionable to the outright evil. But no single wizard in all of history has tasted death and returned to tell about it. It is the law of mortality. One life, one death.”

James nodded, but he was barely listening anymore. His mind was reeling. Finally, Ginny peeked in and sent both boys off to bed.

“So what do you think?” Ralph asked as they passed the curtained portrait of old Mrs. Black and climbed the stairs. “You still think there’s a big Merlin conspiracy?”

James nodded. “Definitely. Remember our first Defense Against the Dark Arts class? When Professor Jackson came in to talk to Professor Franklyn about something? They were both standing up front, then the voodoo queen popped in to tell Jackson his class was waiting for him. Remember?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, you know that case that Jackson carries with him pretty much everywhere? I got a look into it. It came open a little and it was only a few feet away from me. There was a big bundle of some kind of black cloth in it. Jackson saw me looking and gave me a look that’d melt lead!”

James opened the door to his room and Ralph threw himself onto his cot. “So? I don’t get it.”

“Remember what I told you about the night I hid under the invisibility cloak and followed Dad and Professor Franklyn around? Franklyn told Dad that he should keep an eye on Professor Jackson. He said that Jackson was involved in the whole anti-auror propaganda movement. Don’t you see?”

Ralph frowned again, thinking hard. “I don’t know. I can’t believe Professor Jackson would be part of a plot to start a war against the Muggles. He’s hard-core, but he seems cool.”

“That’s what I thought too, but Ralph, you know what I think that thing in his case was? I think it was one of the relics! I think it was Merlin’s robe! He’s keeping it safe until he can get the rest of the relics together.”

Ralph’s eyes widened. “No!” he said in a low whisper. “Can’t be! I mean, Professor Jackson...!”

“That’s not all.” James said, digging into his backpack. “Take a look at this.” He pulled out the folded *Daily Prophet* that Zane had given him, the one with the cover story about the demonstration against Harry Potter’s visit. “It’s been in the bottom of my bag this whole time. I’d forgotten why I even kept it, but take a look at the article on the back.” James tapped the article about the break-in at the Ministry of Magic and the strangely cursed thieves who had apparently not gotten around to stealing anything. Ralph read it slowly, then looked up at James, his eyes large.

“It says one of the places they broke into was the Hall of Mysteries,” he said. “You think these guys were looking for the Merlin throne?”

“Maybe,” James admitted, thinking hard. “But I don’t think so. I think they were hired as a diversion. It says none of them had much of a prior record, right? They couldn’t have broken into the Ministry on their own. I think maybe they were just a distraction, riffling things around and playing a bit of havoc while someone *else* found the throne and got it out of there.”

“But it says here nothing was stolen.” Ralph said, glancing back at the article.

“Well, they wouldn’t admit that the throne of Merlin had been taken, would they?” James replied. “I mean, that’d be a pretty scary bit of dark magic to admit had gone missing, what with all the stories of evil wizards trying to use the relics to bring back Merlin all these centuries past. Then again...” He thought back to what Luna had told them. “If it had been stored in the vaults of the Hall of Mysteries since the sixteenth-hundreds, maybe they didn’t even know it was there anymore. How would they know if one item had gone missing from the place? Luna called them the ‘endless vaults’, didn’t she?”

“So,” Ralph said, still scanning the news article. “Somebody hires these three goons to break-in and make a mess of things, while the real thieves make off with the throne of Merlin. Then, the real thieves curse these guys not to be able to talk, and set them up to take the fall. Right? Pretty sneaky. But still, where do you hide something like Merlin’s throne? Don’t powerful magical objects, especially dark ones, make a pretty noticeable imprint? I mean, your dad and his aurors would’ve picked up on it somehow, wouldn’t they?”

“Yeah,” James agreed doubtfully. “They’d have to put it someplace either really far away from civilization, or hide it under loads of disillusionment charms and secrecy spells. More than just any old witch or wizard could whip up. They’d need a place totally protected and absolutely secret, like...” He stopped, realization dawning on him. His mouth hung open and his eyes grew wider and wider.

“What?” Ralph finally asked. James glanced at him, and then grabbed the newspaper from him. He turned it around, examining the front page.

“That’s it!” he said in a breathless whisper. “Look! The break-in happened the night before we arrived at school! Remember, when we were on the boats crossing the lake for the first time? I saw somebody in a boat over by the lake’s edge!”

“Yeah,” Ralph said slowly, narrowing his eyes. “I guess. The next day, when the Americans arrived, you saw old Madame Delacroix and thought it’d been her. I thought you were being a bit of a nutter.”

James ignored him and went on, “I decided it couldn’t have been her, because the woman I’d seen on the lake had been a lot younger. Still, the resemblance had been pretty scary. You know where I saw that boat, though? It was over by where Zane and I found the Island! The Grotto Keep! I think that *was* Madame Delacroix, after all!”

“How?” Ralph asked simply. “She didn’t arrive until the next day.”

James explained to Ralph what Professor Franklyn had revealed about Madame Delacroix at the dinner in the Alma Aleron’s quarters. “It was her wraith,” he concluded. “She projected herself to the lake, to that place on the Island, using the ability Franklyn told us about. No wonder she was so mad when he explained that she could project a younger version of herself anywhere she wanted!”

Ralph seemed doubtful. “But why? What’d she want to be doing floating around in a boat on the lake?”

“Don’t you see?” James exclaimed, trying to keep his voice low. “Whoever stole the Merlin throne would need to hide it in a place so secure and secret that nobody would ever sense it. What better place to hide it than right on the grounds of Hogwarts? Why create an ultra-powerful hiding place when one already exists, and you’re going to be there anyway? Madame Delacroix sent her wraith to the island that night to deliver the stolen throne. She’s hiding it right on the Hogwarts grounds, there on the Island. The Forbidden Forest is already so full of magic that the throne is probably just lost in the background noise to the wizards at the school. The Grotto Keep must be the hiding place!”

Ralph stared at James, biting his lips and wide-eyed. Finally he said, “Wow, that’s so creepy it makes sense. So you think she’s working with Jackson, then?”

“One way or another, they’re in it together.” James nodded.

“That stinks.” Ralph said flatly. “I was really starting to like Professor Jackson. But still, what’s the big deal, really? I mean, Luna said that it’s impossible to bring Merlin back. She pretty much made it sound like anyone who thinks they can do it is right loony. Once dead, always dead. Why not let Delacroix and Jackson have their fantasies?”

James couldn’t let it go. He shook his head. “I don’t know about Delacroix, but Professor Jackson’s smarter than that. He teaches Technomancy, doesn’t he? He wouldn’t fall for some crackpot scheme if he didn’t think it’d work. Besides, everybody keeps talking about it as if Merlin had died. But Austramaddux doesn’t say he died, does he? He just left the world of men.”

Ralph shrugged. “Whatever. Seems pretty dodgy to me.” He flopped backwards onto the cot.

“Come on, Ralph!” James said, tossing the old newspaper onto him. “They’re trying to bring Merlin back so they can start a war with the Muggles! It’s up to us to stop it!”

Ralph rolled onto his side and furrowed his brow at James. “What do you mean? Your dad’s head auror. If you’re really worried about it, tell him about it. It’s his job to stop things like this, isn’t it? What’re we going to do, anyway?”

James was exasperated. “We can try to stop them! Nobody will believe us if we tell them now. We can try to capture the relics ourselves. If we do that, then we’ll at least have proof!”

Ralph continued to stare at James. After a minute he spoke. “Don’t you think you might be making a bit much of this? I mean, I understand wanting to follow in your dad’s footsteps and all, trying to save the world and be the hero...”

“Shut up, Ralph,” James said, suddenly angry. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ralph rolled onto his back. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.” James knew that, after their earlier fight, Ralph was sensitive not to say anything too argumentative.

“All right,” James admitted, “I know why you’re saying that. But this is different. I’m really not just trying to be like Dad, all right? Maybe there isn’t any way to bring back Merlin. But still, these Progressive Element types are up to no good. If we can prove that they’re trying to start a war, we can at least shut them down, can’t we? If we can do that, I think we should. Are you with me?”

Ralph grinned at James. “Of course. What’s the fun of being a wizard if we aren’t on a quest to save the world?”

James rolled his eyes. “Shut up and go to sleep, Ralphinator.”

But James couldn't sleep, not for a long time. He thought and thought about everything he'd learned that night, the connections he and Ralph had made. It made too much sense. It had to be true. And as much as he trusted Luna, he couldn't quite accept that it would be impossible to bring Merlin into the world somehow. He'd been the greatest wizard ever, hadn't he? He was sure to have been capable of things that even the most powerful wizards since would find impossible. James felt a strong unwillingness to let it go. Still, part of him had been pricked by Ralph's suggestion that James was simply looking for a way to be a hero, like his dad. Not because he knew it wasn't true, but because he was afraid it might be. Finally, several hours after the house had fallen silent, feeling confused and exhausted, James drifted to sleep.



The day before the trip back to school, James was wandering the upper rooms of Grimmauld place, bored and restless. The last of the guests had left the previous day, and Ralph had gone with Ted and Victoire to see Harry's offices at the Ministry. James had been there loads of times, but his primary reason for not accompanying them was that he wanted time to think. After half an hour of lying on his bed and scribbling meaningless notes and drawings on sheets of parchment, he'd given up and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. The top floors were silent and sleepy, with motes of dust swimming lazily in the sunbeams that streamed through the frosted windows. All the beds were made, the trunks mostly packed. Everyone would be leaving Grimmauld Place in the next few days, reducing it once again to temporary emptiness. Even Kreacher had been induced to accompany the family back to the main house in Marble Arch for a couple of months. The age and quiet of the house seemed to fill the rooms, fog-like. James felt like a ghost.

He was passing the door to his parents' bedroom when he stopped. He took a step backwards and peered in. The curtains were thrown wide open and a hard beam of sunlight speared the air, laying a window-shaped spotlight on Harry Potter's trunk. James glanced toward the hall stairs to be sure no one was coming, and then tip-toed into the room. The trunk wasn't completely closed. It didn't even have a lock. James lifted the lid slowly, peering in. There, in the same place it was last time, was his dad's invisibility cloak. It was folded tightly, packed into a corner, almost covered by a pile of socks. James glanced again at the doorway, already feeling guilty. He shouldn't do it, of course. Absolutely not. When his dad found out, there'd be trouble. But then again, maybe his dad wouldn't notice. Harry Potter seemed to carry the

legendary cloak with him merely by force of habit. James couldn't remember the last time his dad had actually used it. It seemed wrong, somehow, that such a useful treasure was not being put to use by someone. James reached in and touched it, then, without allowing himself to think about it, he pulled the cloak out. He was about to turn and flee back to his bedroom, when something else inside the trunk captured his eye. He caught his breath as he looked, barely allowing himself to believe what he was seeing. It had been packed beneath the invisibility cloak, only revealed when James pulled it out. Few people would even recognize what it was. At first glance, it was merely an old parchment, folded many times. Like a map. James considered it. What finally decided him was the thought of what Ted Lupin might say if he knew that James had turned down such a golden opportunity.

James grabbed the Marauder's Map, clutching it and the invisibility cloak to his chest, then carefully closed his dad's trunk. He ran down the steps and back into his bedroom. By the time he'd hidden his contraband in the bottom of his own trunk, he was feeling both excited and frightened in equal measures. There was sure to be a row when he was found out, and there was no question that he *would* be found out. Still, he knew that his dad wouldn't be able to deny that he himself would have done the same thing if he'd been in James' shoes. He was counting on that to temper things when the time came. Until then, he'd put both items to great use. He didn't know exactly how, yet, but there was no question that, with the invisibility cloak *and* the Marauder's Map in his possession, he felt much better equipped to tackle whatever adventures were sure to come.



The return trip to school was, like all post-holiday journeys, melancholy and quiet. Back at Hogwarts the next week, James and Ralph relayed to Zane everything Luna had told them and the connections they had subsequently made. James was gratified that Zane immediately grasped the implications.

"Maybe Madame Delacroix's put the imperius curse on Jackson?" he asked in a low tone, as the three boys huddled around a table in the corner of the library.

"Yeah," Ralph agreed. "That'd make sense. She could just be using him as a tool."

James shook his head. “Dad says the imperius curse is pretty easy to cast, but it takes a lot of willpower to maintain it over a long period of time. The whole school year is a *long* time. Also, a strong enough wizard can learn to throw it off or resist it altogether. Jackson’s too sharp to be an easy target for something like that.”

Ralph shrugged, and then leaned in, lowering his voice as a group of students walked past. “Either way, I still think the whole thing’s a wash. I mean, wizards have been trying to get Merlin back for centuries, haven’t they? And the best wizards alive today believe that the whole thing is just a sort of fairy tale. Professor Franklyn said in D.A.D.A. that the best records show that Merlin ended up getting involved with something called the Lady of the Lake who took his powers and imprisoned him. Could just be part of the legend but still, supposedly he died around twelve hundred and was buried just like anyone else.”

Zane, who was always prone to the morbid imagination, widened his eyes. “What if the plan is to bring him back as an inferius? Maybe they’re just going to raise his body like some kind of zombie or something!”

James rolled his eyes. “Inferi are just animated corpses. Nobody would say somebody had been brought back to life if they’d just been turned into an inferius. It’d be the same thing as just grabbing Merlin’s skull and working it like a puppet.”

Zane held up his hand and mimed a mouth with his fingers, “Hey dudes. I’m Merlin. I just flew back from the dead, and boy are my arms tired.”

James stifled a laugh. “All right, so seriously, maybe the whole Merlin’s return thing is just some crazy legend. Jackson and Delacroix and whoever they’re working with in the Progressive Element believe in it, and as long as they do, they’ll keep at it. Even if the plan to bring back Merlin doesn’t work, they’ll just figure something else out. If we can prove what they are trying to do, though...”

“We can at least shut them down,” Ralph nodded. “Right? Discredit them with the wizarding world?”

“Yeah. And if we can do that, we take away a lot of their ability to accomplish their goal.”

Zane laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. “So. Looks like we need to get our hands on those relics. The throne is too protected for us to get to, if it’s on that island. We don’t yet know who has the Merlin staff, or if anybody even knows where it is. That leaves the robe. At least we know where it is, and as far as we know, Jackson’s case won’t try to bite our legs off if we open it.”

Ralph looked grim. “As far as we know.”

“We need to be able to get it without Jackson knowing it’s gone. If he catches on, they’ll have time to back off and cover their tracks.” James said, thinking hard. “I just wish we knew when they were planning on bringing all the relics together. We have to get them before they try it.”

“And where’s this Hall of Elder’s Crossing?” Ralph added.

“I figured it’s got to be the Island itself,” James answered, raising his eyebrows.

It was Zane’s turn to shake his head. “Nah. Can’t be. The sign on the gate said that it was the Grotto Keep. At the bottom, it said something about the Hall of Elder’s Crossing, as if it was someplace else.”

James dug in his backpack, finding the sheet of parchment he and Zane had recreated the gate poem on. He spread it between them. In the light of what Luna had told them about the relics, the poem made a lot more sense. They read it, along with their scribbled notes, once again.

When by the light of Sulva bright -- *sulva = moon*

I found the Grotto Keep; -- *means can only find the Keep by moonlight*

Before the night of time requite -- *time requite? A certain date?*

Did wake his languid sleep. -- *Merlinus; sleeping? Rip Van Winkle*

Upon return the fretted dawn -- *happens at nighttime?*

With not a relic lossing; -- *the three relics! Brought back together*

Bygone a life, a new eon, -- *a life from the past in a new time; the legend’s origin?*

The Hall of Elder’s Crossing. -- *here? where?*

“Yeah,” James agreed reluctantly. “It makes it sound like the Hall of Elder’s Crossing is a different place entirely. Maybe the Grotto Keep *becomes* the Hall of Elder’s Crossing, somehow?”

Zane shrugged, unconvinced, “Meh.”

“Doesn’t make any difference, really,” Ralph said after a minute’s thought. “It’s just some old poem. Part of the legend.”

“You didn’t see the Island,” Zane said with feeling, then, turning to James, “You think that whole Grotto Keep grew up there on the Island in response to the throne being there?”

“Could be,” James nodded. “Whether the legend’s true or not, that thing’s got to have some serious magic in it. Probably, Madame Delacroix has added her own protective hexes and charms as well.”

“Either way,” Ralph insisted, “we need to get the robe from Jackson’s briefcase. Any ideas?”

All three boys merely looked at one another. Finally, James said, "I'll work on a plan. We're going to need something to replace the robe with, though."

"It was just a hunk of black fabric, you say?" Ralph said, "We can use my dress cloak. My dad got me the entire wizard wardrobe when we were in Diagon Alley before school started, and unless I have to go to somebody's wedding or funeral, I can't imagine I'll need that thing. It's bigger than my bedspread."

James considered it. "Sure, I guess it'll work as well as anything. Although," he added, looking seriously at Ralph, "if they trace it back to you..."

Ralph was silent for a moment, and then shrugged. "Ah, well. I've got no shortage of enemies already. One or two more can't hurt much."

Considering the caliber of enemy Ralph might make with such a plot, James thought it might hurt indeed, but he decided not to say so. He was proud of Ralph for volunteering, and he felt that it showed that Ralph had a great deal of confidence in James. James hoped he was worthy of it.

For the rest of the week, James had very little time to think about Jackson's briefcase and the relic robe. As if he knew what they were up to, Professor Jackson had piled on more homework than usual, assigning nearly five chapters and a five-hundred word essay on Hechtor's Law of Displaced Inertia. At the same time, Professor Franklyn had planned a practical examination for late Friday afternoon, leaving only one day for James, Zane and Ralph to practice disarming and blocking spells. Ralph was forced to practice on a fencing dummy. After two hours, he finally succeeded in casting an expeliarmus spell without burning a crater in the clothbound mannequin. Fortunately, Franklyn himself deigned to act as Ralph's dueling partner during the practical. Ralph, slightly more confident that Franklyn could deflect any errant spells than any of his classmates, was able to concentrate a bit more on his wand-work. To no one's greater surprise than his own, his expeliarmus spell actually succeeded in blasting Franklyn's wand from his hand. It vibrated in the ceiling like an arrow.

"Well done, Mr. Deedle," Franklyn said, a bit faintly, gazing up at his wand. "Mr. Potter, would you be so kind as to retrieve my wand for me? There's a ladder by the supply closet. That's a lad."

As James and Ralph were leaving the Defense Against the Dark Arts practical, James noticed that he was once again being watched closely by the mustachioed man in the painting of wizards gathered around the large globe. For the past week, he had begun noticing similar looks from paintings throughout the halls. Not all the paintings, by any means, but enough to nag at his attention. The fat wizard in the corner of the table at the painting of the poisoning of Peracles had seemed to listen intently as he, Ralph and Zane had discussed Jackson's briefcase in the library. A cavalry rider in the painting of the Battle of Bourgenoigne had cantered his horse to the corner of the painting to watch James out of sight as he'd walked to Muggle Studies. Perhaps strangest of all, a portrait of a portrait in the painting of the crowning of King Cyciphus had studied James unabashedly from the wall of the Great Hall as he and Zane were eating breakfast.

James stopped on his way to the common room and approached the painting of the wizards gathered around the globe. The wizard with the dark mustache and spectacles peered at him with a hard, unreadable expression.

“What?” James demanded, “Do I have mustard on my tie or something?”

The painted wizard’s expression didn’t change, and once again, James found that there was something teasingly familiar about him.

“I know you, somehow,” he said, “Who are you?”

“You’re talking to a painting,” Ralph pointed out.

“I talk to a painting everyday to get into the common room,” James said without turning around.

“Yeah,” Ralph nodded. “Still, it just seems a little weird to go around starting arguments with random paintings in the halls.”

“Where do I know you from?” James asked the painting, annoyed.

“Young man,” another wizard in the painting spoke up, “that’s hardly the tone we are accustomed to being addressed in. Respect and deference, if you please. We are your elders.”

James ignored him, still studying the wizard with the mustache and spectacles, who merely stared back at him silently. It occurred to James that the wizard only seemed familiar because, somehow, he looked like the rest of the paintings that had been watching him. But that was obviously ridiculous, wasn’t it? There was the fat man with the bald head, and the thin wizard in the portrait of the portrait, who’d had a great bushy blonde beard. All of the paintings he’d caught watching him were utterly different. A few had even been rather ugly women. Still, there was something about the eyes and the shape of the face. James shook his head. He felt so close to figuring it out, yet it remained beyond his grasp.

“Come on,” Ralph finally said, grabbing James’ arm. “Argue with the paintings later. It’s steak and kidneys night.”

That weekend, James gave his new Thunderstreak a test ride on the Quidditch pitch. It was indeed an entirely different experience than riding any of the House brooms. The Thunderstreak was noticeably faster, but more importantly, it responded to James’ direction with an accuracy and ease that bordered on precognition. James would merely think that perhaps he’d like to dip or turn, and suddenly he’d find that it was happening. Ted explained, rather breathlessly, that the Thunderstreak was equipped with an option called Extra-Gestural Enhancement.

“Basically,” he said in an awed voice, “the broom can read its owner’s mind, just enough that it only needs the slightest touch to go where you want it to go. It already knows what you want, so the moment you steer, you’re already there.”

James offered to let Ted ride the broom, but Ted shook his head sadly. “It’s bonded with you. You’re the owner. If anybody else tried to fly it, it’d go all wonky. It’s a drawback of the E.G.E. option. Or a plus, if you’re worried about people trying to steal it.”

“Me wantee,” Zane said in a low voice. “How much are they?”

“How much do you have?” Ted asked.

Zane thought for a moment. “Since I gave my last five to the house elf doorman, er, nothing.”

“It costs more than that.” Ted said, nodding.

On the way back to the castle, Zane told James that he’d had an idea about how to swap the relic robe with Ralph’s dress cloak.

“Meet me tonight in the Ravenclaw common room,” he said. “Tell Ralph to come, too, when you see him. I’ll meet you both at the door at nine.”

That night, the Ravenclaw common room was unusually empty. Zane explained that there was a wizard chess tournament going on in the Great Hall. “Horace Birch is playing Professor Franklyn for the title of grand wizard chess champion of the universe, or something. Unofficial, I’m thinking. Anyway, everybody’s down there cheering him on. So, have either of you come up with a way to get the robe relic from Jackson yet?”

“I thought you said you had a plan?” James said.

“I do, but it’s pretty iffy. I thought I’d listen to your ideas first, in case they were better.”

James shook his head. Ralph said, “I’ve been watching Professor Jackson. He never lets that briefcase out of his sight.”

“Actually,” Zane said, settling into a chair by the fire, “that’s not entirely true.”

Ralph and James sat on the sofa. James said, “Ralph’s right. He even takes it to Quidditch matches. He sets it between his feet at meals. He’s got it with him constantly.”

“He does have it with him constantly,” Zane agreed, “but there’s one situation where he isn’t exactly keeping his eye on it.”

“What?” James exclaimed. “Where?”

“Technomancy class,” Zane answered simply. “Think about it. What’s he do all class long?”

James considered it a moment, then his eyes widened slightly. “He paces.”

“Bingo.” Zane said, pointing at James. “He puts his case on the floor by his desk, careful as always, but then he paces. He circles the room ten times a class, I bet. I’ve been watching. Takes him about a minute to make it all the way around the room, which means that for about twenty seconds, his back is turned to the briefcase.”

“Wait,” Ralph interjected, “you think we should try to make the switch right in the middle of class?”

Zane shrugged. “Like I said, it isn’t a great idea.”

“How? There’s twenty people in that class. We can’t have them all in on it.”

“No,” James agreed. “Philia Goyle’s in that class. She’s tight with Tabitha Corsica, and it’s possible, even likely, that they’re in on the Merlin plot. Philia may even know what’s in the case. Nobody else can know what we’re up to.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s impossible.” Zane said.

Ralph frowned. “You think we’re going to be able to get into Jackson’s case, swap the robes, and close it again, all while Jackson’s back is turned for twenty seconds, and without anyone else in the class catching on?”

“Hmm,” James said, furrowing his brow. “Maybe we don’t need to get *into* the briefcase. What if we find another briefcase? We could stuff Ralph’s cloak in it and somehow just swap the cases while Jackson’s back is turned.”

Ralph was still doubtful. “Jackson will be able to tell. He carries that thing with him everywhere. He’s probably memorized every scratch and scuff on it.”

“Actually,” Zane said thoughtfully, “it’s a pretty standard-looking leather briefcase. I’ve seen others almost exactly like it right here at Hogwarts. If we could find something close enough...” Zane suddenly sat up and snapped his fingers. “Horace!”

“Horace?” James blinked. “Horace Birch? The gremlin wizard chess player? What’s he got to do with anything?”

Zane shook his head excitedly. “Remember the Wocket? Horace used a *visum-ineptio* charm to make it look like a flying saucer. It’s a fool-the-eye charm! He said it just makes people see what they expect to see. If we found a case that looked enough like Jackson’s, then put a *visum-ineptio* charm on it, I bet that’d be enough to fool old Stonewall good! I mean, he’d never expect anything to happen to his case during class, so the charm should help him see the fake briefcase as his own. Right?”

Ralph thought about it and seemed to brighten. “That’s so crazy it just might work.”

“Yeah,” James added, “but still, how do we swap the cases during class without anyone else noticing?”

“We’d need a diversion,” Zane said firmly.

Ralph grimaced. “You’ve watched too much telly.”

James frowned, thinking of the invisibility cloak. “You know,” he said, “I think I have an idea.” He told Zane and James about finding the invisibility cloak and the Marauder’s Map.

“You liberated them from your dad’s trunk!” Zane grinned delightedly. “You little miscreant! Ted will want to kiss you.”

“He doesn’t know, and I want to keep it that way, for now, at least.” James said sternly. “But the point is, I think we can use the invisibility cloak to make the switch without anyone knowing. It’ll require all of us, though.”

“I’m not even in that class,” Ralph said.

James nodded. “I know. What class do you have that period? First slot Wednesday?”

Ralph thought. “Um. Arithmancy. Ugh.”

“Can you miss one?”

“I guess. Why?”

James explained his plan. Zane began to grin, but Ralph looked uncomfortable. “I’m a terrible liar. They’ll catch on straight off,” he moaned, “Can’t Zane do my part? He’s a natural.”

James shook his head. “He’s in the class with me. It’d be no good.”

“You can do it, Ralph.” Zane said heartily. “The trick is to look ‘em straight in the eye and never blink. I’ll teach you everything I know. We’ll make a liar out of you yet.”

That night, as James got ready for bed, he ran through the plan in his mind. Now that he’d allowed himself to consider the impossibility of Merlin’s literal return, he felt rather silly for having been so certain of it. Obviously, it really was just a mad delusion for power-crazed dark wizards. Still, it was evident that Jackson and Delacroix, at least, believed in it enough to try it. If James, Ralph and Zane could capture the relic robe, that would be enough proof to get his dad and his aunts to search the island of the Grotto Keep. They’d find the Merlin throne, and the conspiracy would be revealed. It’d be front page news in the *Daily Prophet*, and Tabitha Corsica’s Progressive Element, which was surely part of the plot, would be revealed as a campaign of lies and propaganda, intent only on war and domination. With that vision in his head, James felt a stab of determination to do everything he could to capture the relic robe.

As he evaluated the plan, however, he had his doubts. It was certainly a rather convoluted scheme, with loads of variables. Much of it would depend entirely on dumb luck. One minute, James was certain it would work flawlessly, the next, he was sure it would be a ridiculous failure and he, James and Zane would be

caught. What would they say? Jackson would know they were aware of his plan. Would that be enough to stop the plot? James was, after all, the son of the Head Auror. James thought not. If James and his friends were caught trying to steal the relic, Jackson would know they hadn't yet told Harry Potter anything. Would Jackson and his co-conspirators stoop to murder to keep their plans a secret? He could hardly believe it, but then again, he had been amazed to discover Jackson's involvement in such a terrible plan to begin with. No matter what, James was sure, probably more than either Zane or Ralph, that the three of them might be in great danger if their scheme failed.

For the first time, he considered telling his dad everything. He could send Nobby with a letter, explaining everything they'd worked out so far. If the three of them succeeded in their plan to capture the relic robe, then he'd have proof to back up the letter. If they failed and were caught, at least someone else would know about the Merlin plot. It was too late to write the letter that night, but he felt reassured that it would be a good idea, and he determined to do it first thing in the morning. Thinking that, he fell asleep. The next morning, however, as he ran down the steps to breakfast, he forgot all about it. In the light of a new day and a new week, he felt perfectly confident that their plan would work. Failure was inconceivable. He was in such high spirits about it that he barely noticed the pale wizard in the painting of the Assumption of Saint Mungo watching him intently, frowning and stone-faced.