



10. HOLIDAY AT GRIMMAULD PLACE

The next Monday, James, Zane and Ralph stood outside the door of Headmistress McGonagall's Advanced Transfiguration class until the last of her students left and she was gathering her things.

"Come in, come in," she called to the three boys without looking up. "Stop lurking outside the door like vultures. How may I help you?"

"Madame headmistress," James began tentatively. "We want to talk to you about the debate."

"Do you, now?" she asked, glancing up at James for a moment, then shouldering her bag. "Why, I cannot begin to imagine. The sooner we can all forget that fiasco, the better."

The boys scrambled to follow the headmistress as she strode toward the door. "But nobody is forgetting it, Madame," James said quickly. "It was all anybody talked about the whole weekend. People are getting really stirred up about it. There was almost a fight out in the courtyard yesterday, when Mustrium

Jewel heard Reavis McMillan call Tabitha Corsica a lying twit. If Professor Longbottom hadn't been nearby, Mustrum probably would've killed Reavis."

"This is a school, Mr. Potter, and a school is, in its simplest form, a place where young people gather. Young people are occasionally prone to have spats. This is why, among other reasons, Hogwarts employs Mr. Filch."

"It wasn't a spat, Madame," Ralph said, following the headmistress out into the corridor. "They were really mad. Daft mad, if you know what I mean. People are coming unglued about this whole business."

"Then like Mr. Potter says, it is fortunate Professor Longbottom was nearby. I fail to see, precisely, why this is your problem."

Zane trotted to keep up with the headmistress' stride. "Well, the thing is, Ma'am, we're just wondering why you're letting it all go on? I mean, you were there when the Battle took place. You know what this Voldemort guy was like. You could just tell everyone how it was and put Tabitha in her place, neat as you please."

McGonagall stopped suddenly, leaving the boys to scramble to a halt near her. "What, may I ask, would you three wish me to do?" she said, dropping her voice and looking at each one intently. "The truth about the Dark Lord and his followers has been common knowledge for thirty years, ever since he murdered your grandparents, Mr. Potter. Do you suppose that my repeating it one more time will dispel all the revisionist rabble-rousing that has been going on, not only at this school, but throughout the wizarding world? Hmm?" Her eyes were like diamond chips as she glared at them. James realized that she was, if anything, even more agitated about the debate than they were. "And suppose I summon Miss Corsica to my office and forbid her from disseminating these lies and distortions. Do you expect that this 'Progressive Element' of theirs will simply give up? How long do you suppose it would be before we'd be reading an article in the *Daily Prophet* about how the administration of Hogwarts is working with the Department of Aurors to stifle the 'free exchange of ideas on school grounds'?"

James was stunned. He had assumed that the headmistress was indulging Tabitha Corsica for some reason, allowing, for a time, her charade to continue. It simply hadn't occurred to him that McGonagall might not, in fact, be capable of addressing the matter without making it worse.

"So what do we do, Ma'am?" James asked.

"We?" McGonagall said, raising her eyebrows. "My dear James, I admit that you amaze and impress me. Despite what you may believe, the future of the wizarding world does not, in fact, rest upon you and your two friends' shoulders." She saw the annoyed grimace on his face, and then she showed him one of her rare smiles. She bent a bit to speak more conspiratorially, addressing all three boys. "The revived memory of the Dark Lord is not an overlarge concern to those of us who once faced the living thing. This is a whim in the mind of a fickle populace, and irritating as it may be, it will pass. In the meantime, what you three can do is attend your classes, do your homework and continue to be the sharp-witted and strong-hearted boys you

obviously are. And if anyone around you tries to say Tom Riddle was a better man than Harry Potter, you have my permission – my instruction, even – to transfigure their pumpkin juice into nurgle water.” She eyed the three boys seriously, one by one. “Just tell them I prescribed you to practice that particular spell. Understood?”

Zane and Ralph grinned at each other. James sighed. McGonagall nodded curtly, straightened herself, and continued briskly on her way. After five steps she turned back.

“Oh, and boys?”

“Yes ma’am?” Zane said.

“Two sharp flicks and the words ‘nurglammonias’. Emphasis on the first and third syllables.”

“Yes ma’am!” Zane replied again, grinning.

The school year descended through autumn, approaching the winter holidays. The football field became carpeted with leaves, crunching and kicking up under the feet of Professor Curry’s Muggle studies teams. The unofficial football tournament ended with James’ team winning. James himself scored the winning goal, his third of the day, against goalie Horace Birch, the Ravenclaw Gremlin. His team collected around him, jumping and hollering as if they’d just won the House Cup. In fact, the winning team’s House was rewarded one hundred points by Professor Curry, that being the best prize she could offer. The team circled James, heaving him onto their shoulders and carrying him into the courtyard as if he had just returned from slaying a dragon. He grinned hugely, his cheeks beet red in the chilly autumn wind, and his spirits were higher than they’d been all year.

The routine of classes and homework, which had been daunting during the first weeks, became dull and predictable. Professor Jackson assigned endless, dreaded essays and sprung unsuspecting “pop quizzes” on his class every couple of weeks. Zane told James and Ralph amusing tales of confrontations between Professor Trelawney and Madame Delacroix during his Tuesday night Constellations Club, which, like Divination class, both professors managed to share. On the Quidditch pitch, James continued to advance his broom skills, with the help of both Ted and Zane, until he began to feel cautiously confident that he might, indeed, make the Gryffindor team next year. He began to imagine how rich it might be to show up at tryouts next spring and wildly surpass everyone’s memories of his first year attempts. Zane, for his part, continued to fly remarkably well for the Ravenclaws. Calling on his rather unique Muggle background, he invented a move he called “buzzing the tower”, in which he’d hit a bludger around the press box, letting it gather speed as it circled back, then meet it on the other side, striking it again to add even more speed and a bit of direction. Using that trick, he had managed to knock two players completely off their brooms, leading to a few apologetic visits to the hospital wing.

Life for Ralph in the Slytherin house had been rough for a while. Tabitha had never actually spoken to him about his desertion of the debate stage, or his abandoning of the Progressive Element meetings. James and Zane figured she’d ceased having any use for him when he’d returned to being James’ friend. Eventually,

the older Slytherins simply forgot about Ralph, apart from a few cool stares or snide remarks in the Slytherin common room. Then, surprisingly, Ralph began to befriend some other first and second year Slytherins. Unlike the blue badge wearers, none of them seemed all that interested in the broader world of politics and causes. To be sure, there was a sort of shifty guile to even the first year Slytherins, but a couple of them seemed to genuinely like Ralph, and even James had to admit they were funny, in a double-edged sort of way.

Defense Against the Dark Arts became a favorite class of James, Zane and Ralph. Professor Franklyn taught a very practical class, with many exciting stories and real-life examples from his own long and wildly various adventures. James, to no one's surprise, was a very good dueler. He admitted, with a sheepish grin, that he'd been taught quite a lot of defensive technique by his dad. Nobody, however, including James, was willing to go up against Ralph in a duel. Ralph's wand skills seemed remarkably haphazard when it came to defensive spell-casting. The first time he'd dueled, Ralph had attempted a simple *expeliarmus* spell on Victoire. He struck out with his wand, a bit wildly, and a bolt of blue lightning had erupted from the end, singeing Victoire's hair so that a ragged bald stripe ran straight across the top of her head. She patted at it with her hand, then her eyes nearly boggled out of her head. She screamed in rage and had to be restrained by three other students from tackling Ralph, who was three times her size. Ralph backed away, apologizing profusely, his wand still smoking.

Only once, during an evening in the Ravenclaw common room, did anyone have the temerity to mention anything to James, Zane and Ralph about the debate. They were just finishing their homework when a large fourth year named Gregory Templeton sat down at the table across from them.

"Hey, you were both in that debate, weren't you?" he said, pointing back and forth between Zane and Ralph.

"Yeah, Gregory," Zane said, shoving his books into his backpack, his voice betraying his general dislike of the older boy.

"You were the one at the table with Corsica, right?" Gregory said, turning to Ralph.

"Er. Yeah." Ralph said, "but..."

"You tell her from me she's right on the mark, eh? I been reading a book that tells all about the whole thing. It's called 'the Dumbledore Plot', and it's all about how the old man and that Harry Potter cooked the whole thing up, start to finish. Did you know they made up the whole story about Riddle and the horcruxes on the night the old man died? Some even say it was Harry Potter himself killed him, once they'd worked it all out."

James struggled to control his temper. He looked levelly at Gregory. "Do you even know who I am?"

Zane stared hard at the bottle in Gregory's hand. "Hey," he asked with forced casualness, surreptitiously pulling out his wand, "what's that you're drinking?"

Ninety seconds later, James, Zane and Ralph scrambled as Gregory spat nurgle water all over the common room table.

“Practicing!” Zane called, ducking under Gregory’s grasping arms. “I swear! I was supposed to practice that transfiguration! Your drink just got in the way! Ask McGonagall!”

The three boys successfully ducked from the room, laughing uproariously at the ensuing chaos.

By Christmas holiday, James was ready for a break. After lunch on his last day of class, James went up to the Gryffindor sleeping chamber to pack his things. The sky outside the tower window had grown chilly and grey, making him wish for the grand fireplace back at number twelve Grimmauld Place and one of Kreacher’s very complicated hot chocolates, which consisted, at last count, of fourteen unnamed ingredients, including, he had been assured, at least a pinch of actual chocolate.

“Hey James,” Ralph’s voice called up the stairs. “You up there?”

“Yeah. Come on up, Ralph.”

“Thanks,” Ralph panted, climbing the steps. “I came up after lunch with Petra. She said you’d be here packing. All raring to go, I expect.”

“Yeah! We’re having everyone over to the old headquarters for the holidays this year. Uncle George and Ron, aunt Hermione and Fleur, Ted and his grandmum, Victoire, even Luna Lovegood, who you don’t know but you’d be keen on. She’s the weirdest grown-up I’ve ever met, but in a good way. Mostly. Grandmum and granddad won’t be there, though. They’re visiting Charlie and everybody in Prague this year. Still, I think even Neville will be there. Professor Longbottom, I mean.”

Ralph nodded glumly, staring into James’ trunk. “Sounds swell. Yeah, well, I hope you have a happy Christmas and all that, then.”

James stopped packing, remembering that Ralph’s dad was traveling for business over the holidays. “Oh, yeah. So what will you be doing, Ralph? Will you be spending Christmas with your grandparents or something?”

“Hmm?” Ralph said, glancing up. “Oh. Nah. Looks like I’ll just be hanging around here for the holidays. Zane’s not leaving until next week, so at least I’ll have him to hang around with over the weekend. After that... well, I’ll figure out something to do with myself.” He sighed hugely.

“Ralph,” James said, tossing a pair of mismatched socks into his trunk. “Do you want to come and have Christmas with my family and me?”

Ralph tried to look surprised. “What? No, no, I’d never want to impose on your big family gathering, what with all the, you know... I couldn’t. No...”

James frowned. “Ralph, you prat, if you don’t come home with me for the holidays, I will personally perform a random transfiguration on you with your own wand. How about that, then?”

“Well, you don’t have to get pushy about it!” Ralph exclaimed, then his face broke into a grin. “Your mum and dad won’t mind?”

“No. To tell you the truth, with all the people that’ll be in and out of the place, I’m not sure they’ll even notice.”

Ralph rolled his eyes. “I meant about me being on the... you know, the wrong side of the debate and everything.”

“They listened to it on the wireless, Ralph.”

“I know!”

“And you never said a word.”

Ralph opened his mouth, then closed it. He thought for a moment. Finally he grinned and plopped onto Ted’s bed. “I see your point. So. You say Victoire will be there?”

“Don’t get any ideas. She’s part Veela you know. She puts the whammy on any guy that gets within ten feet of her.”

“I just wanted to try to make it up to her somehow. You know, about that whole incident in D.A.D.A.”

James slammed his trunk. “Ralph, mate, the less you say about that, the better.”



The next morning, breakfast in the Great Hall was thinly attended. A heavy frost had fallen in the early hours, etching silver fern shapes in the corners of the windows and giving the view beyond a hoary ghostliness. James and Ralph arrived at the same time and found Zane at the Ravenclaw table.

“You’re a lucky stiff, Ralph.” Zane said grumpily, huddling around his coffee cup. “I’m dying to see what a magical Christmas is like.”

“To tell you the truth,” James said, pouring himself a pumpkin juice, “I doubt it’d live up to your imagination.”

“Maybe you’re right. Even at the best of times, I gotta admit, it feels a little like Halloween around here.”

“Hey Ralph,” James said, nudging the bigger boy, “wait until you see our traditional Christmas parade of ghouls! We’ll have candy cane stuffed bats to eat and drink hot chocolate out of elf skulls!”

Ralph blinked. Zane looked sour and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, you’re a laugh riot. Not.”

“Come on,” Ralph said, finally getting the joke. “You’ll have a great Christmas with your family. At least you get to see your mum and dad.”

“Yeah, sure. An eight-hour flight back to the states with my sister Greer bugging me the whole way about life at that crazy magical school. She’ll be disappointed that, so far, the only way I can affect things with my wand is to hit them with it.”

“We’re not allowed to practice magic out of Hogwarts, anyway.” Ralph said instructively.

Zane ignored him. “And then, Christmas with the grandparents and all my cousins in Ohio. You have no idea what kind of craziness that always is.”

James couldn’t help asking. “How do you mean?”

“Imagine the traditional all-American, Norman Rockwell Christmas scene, right?” Zane said, holding up his hands as if framing a picture. “Opening presents, and carving turkey, and carols by the Christmas tree. Got it?” Ralph and James nodded, trying not to smile at Zane’s grave expression.

“All right,” Zane went on, “Now imagine hinkypunks instead of people. You’ll get the idea.”

James burst out laughing. Ralph, as usual, just blinked and looked back and forth between the two other boys.

“That’s fantastic!” James hooted.

Zane smiled reluctantly. “Yeah, well, it is pretty funny, I guess. The screeches and the clawing, all those tiny shreds of wrapping paper flying all over the place, landing in the fireplace and nearly burning the place to the ground.”

“What’s a hinkypunk?” Ralph asked, trying to keep up.

“Ask Hagrid next Care of Magical Creatures.” James said, still chuckling. “It’ll all make sense.”

Late that morning, Ralph and James said goodbye to Zane, then hauled their trunks out to the courtyard. Ted and Victoire were already there, sitting on their trunks on the top step, framed against the strangely silent, frost-laden grounds. Victoire’s hair had been regrown as well as possible by Madame Curio in the hospital wing, but the new hair was just different enough in texture and color to be noticeable. As a result, Victoire had taken to wearing a rather amazing variety of hats. The hats, if anything, enhanced her appearance, but she complained about them at every opportunity. Today, she had donned a small ermine pillbox cap, cocked rakishly over her left eyebrow. She glared coolly at Ralph as he drug his trunk out onto the step. A few minutes later, Hagrid drove up at the head of a carriage. Ralph’s mouth dropped open when he saw that nothing, apparently, was pulling the carriage.

“You lot aren’t s’posed to see these until next year, mind.” Hagrid said to James, Ralph and Victoire. He yanked the brake lever, climbed down and began heaving their trunks easily onto the back of the carriage. “So be sure to act surprised when yeh sees ‘em next spring, right?”

“Oh, Hagrid.” Victoire said haughtily, “If zese awful things are as ugly as mummy tells me, I’m glad I can’t see zem, anyway.” She held out a hand and Ted took it, helping her rather unnecessarily into the carriage.

There were a few other students crammed into the carriage, all similarly late departures for the holidays. Hagrid drove them to Hogsmeade station, where they boarded the Hogwarts Express again. The train was far emptier than it had been on their arriving journey. The four of them found a compartment near the end, then settled in for the long trip.

“So Hogsmeade is a wizard village?” Ralph asked Ted.

“Sure is. Home to the Three Broomsticks and Honeyduke’s Sweetshop. Best cockroach clusters in the world. Lots of other shops, too. You’ll get to go on Hogsmeade weekends starting your third year.”

Ralph looked thoughtful, which meant his brow pinched down while his lower lip pooched up, squeezing his entire face toward his nose. “So how do wizards keep Muggles out of a magical village? I mean, aren’t there any roads or anything?”

“Tricky question, mate.” Ted said, slouching on his seat and kicking off his shoes.

Victoire wrinkled her nose. “You will keep zose dirt-kickers away from me, Mr. Lupin.”

Ted ignored her, stretching his legs across the compartment and resting his feet on the opposite seat. “I’m in old Stonewall’s Applied Advanced Technomancy class this semester, and all I can tell you is that places like Hogsmeade aren’t just hidden because Muggles can’t find a road in. It’s all quantum. If Petra was here, she could explain it better.”

James was curious. “What’s quantum mean?”

Ted shrugged. “It’s a joke in A.A.T. When in doubt, just say ‘quantum’.” He sighed resignedly, gathering his thoughts. “All right, imagine that there are places on the earth that are like a hole in space patched with rubber, see? You can’t tell anything’s different from the top, but it’s maybe a little bouncy or something. Then, say, some wizard comes along who really knows his quantum. He says, gor, here’s a place where we can put up a smashing wizard village. So what he does is he conjures something sort of like a huge magical weight, but it’s really, really tiny, right? And the weight drops into the bit of rubbery reality and pulls it down, down, down. OK. So the weight punches that rubber reality right out into another dimension, making a funnel in the shape of space-time.”

“Wait,” Ralph said, frowning in concentration, “What’s space-time?”

“Nevermind,” Ted said, waving dismissively, “Doesn’t matter. It’s all quantum. Nobody gets it except for crusty old parchment-heads like Professor Jackson. So anyway, there’s this funnel in space-time where the weight pushes down on the rubber reality. Muggles, see, can only operate on the surface of reality. They don’t see where the funnel dips down into this new dimensional space. To them, it just isn’t even there. Magic folk, though, we can follow the funnel down off main-space, if we know what to look for and share the secret. So we build places like Hogsmeade there.”

“So Hogsmeade is down in some sort of funnel-shaped valley,” Ralph said experimentally.

“No.” Ted said, sitting up again. “It’s just, you know, a metaphor. The landscape looks just the same, but dimensionally, it goes out through the other side of space-time, where Muggles can’t go. Lots of wizard places have been built that way. We breed magical creatures in quantum preserves. Whole mountain ranges where the giants live, all buried in quantum, off the Muggle maps. That’s pretty much how unplottability works. Simple as that.”

“Simple as what?” Ralph said, frustrated.

Ted sighed. “Look, mate, it’s like the cockroach clusters in Honeyduke’s. You don’t need to understand how they make them. You just need to eat ‘em.”

Ralph slumped. “I’m not sure I can do either.”

“This bloke’s a real barrel o’ laughs, isn’t he?” Ted asked James.

“So if Muggles can’t get in,” James replied, “how’d that Muggle get onto the school grounds?”

“Oh yeah,” Ted said, leaning back again. “The mysterious Quidditch intruder. Is that what people are saying now? That he was a Muggle?”

James had forgotten that not everything he knew about the intruder was common knowledge. He recalled now what Neville Longbottom had said about the wild rumors surrounding the mysterious man on

the Quidditch pitch. “Yeah,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant. “I heard he may have been a Muggle. I was just wondering how a Muggle could get in, what with all this stuff about, you know, quantum.”

“Actually,” Ted said, squinting out the window at the brightening day. “I guess even a Muggle could get in if they were accompanied by a wizard, or led in somehow. It’s not that they *can’t* get in, exactly. It’s just that, as far as their senses are concerned, the spaces don’t even exist. If a magical person led them in, though, and the Muggle pushed through what their senses were telling them... sure, it’d be possible, I guess. But who’d be stupid enough to do such a thing?”

James shrugged, and looked at Ralph. The look on Ralph’s face mirrored what James was thinking. Stupid or not, somebody had indeed led a Muggle onto the Hogwarts grounds. How or why that had been arranged was still a mystery, but James intended to do his best to find out.

The four of them lunched on sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, taken from the Hogwarts kitchens that morning, then settled into companionable silence. The day became hard and bright, with the sun shining like a diamond over the marching fields and woods. The frost had burned away, leaving the ground raw and grey. The skeletal trees scoured at the sky, standing on carpets of dead leaves. Ralph read and napped. Victoire flipped through a pile of magazines, then wandered off in search of a few friends she suspected were somewhere on board. Ted taught James to play a game called Winkles and Augers, which involved using wands to levitate a piece of parchment folded into the shape of a fat triangle. According to Ted, both players used their wands- the winkles- to simultaneously levitate the folded parchment- the auger- each one trying to guide the paper into their designated goal area, usually a circle drawn on a piece of parchment and placed near their opponent. James had gotten marginally better at levitation, but he was no match for Ted, who knew just how to undercut James’ wand-work, bobbing the auger out of range and swooping it onto his goal with a resounding smack.

“It’s all about practice, James.” Ted said. “I’ve been playing this since my first year. We’ve had as many as four people on a team sometimes, and used augers as big as the bust of Godric Gryffindor in the common room. I’m personally responsible for the fact that his left ear’s been glued back on. Didn’t know the *reparo* charm back then, and now we’ve come to rather prefer him that way.”

By the time the train pulled into station nine and three quarters, dusk had begun to turn the sky a dreamy lilac color. James, Ted and Ralph waited for the lurch as the train came to a full stop, then stood, stretched, and made their way out to the platform.

The porter took their tickets, then produced their trunks with an *accio* spell, sucking each trunk rather roughly out of the baggage compartment and plunking it at its owner’s feet. Victoire caught up with them as they piled their trunks onto a large cart.

“I’m to escort you all to the old headquarters,” Ted said importantly, drawing himself to his full height. “It’s close enough, and your parents are pretty busy tonight, James, what with everyone else arriving, and Lily and Albus just getting out of school today as well.”

They filed through the hidden portal that separated platform nine and three quarters from the Muggle platforms of King's Cross station.

"You don't drive, Ted," Victoire said reproachfully. "And you'll hardly fit the four of us on your broom. What do you expect to do?"

"I suppose you're right, Victoire." Ted said, stopping in the center of the concourse and looking around. Muggle travelers moved around them, hurrying here and there, most bundled into heavy coats and hats. The huge concourse echoed with the sound of train announcements and the tinkly din of recorded Christmas carols.

"Looks like we're stuck," Ted said mildly, "I'd say this is an emergency of sorts, wouldn't you?"

"Ted, no!" Victoire scolded as Ted raised his right hand, his wand sticking up out of it.

There was a loud crack that echoed all around the concourse, apparently unheard by the milling Muggles. A huge purple shape shot through the doors framed in the gigantic glassed arch at the head of the concourse. It was, of course, the Knight Bus. James had known to expect it when Ted had made the signal, but he'd never known it could travel off-road. The enormous triple-decker bus dodged and squeezed through the oblivious crowd, never losing speed until it squeaked violently to a halt directly in front of Ted. The doors shuttled open and a man in a natty purple uniform leaned out.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus," the man said, a bit huffily. "Emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. You know this is the middle of effing King's Cross Station, don't you? Seems like you could've at least made it to the front step."

"Evening, Frank," Ted said airily, hoisting Victoire's trunk up to the conductor. "It's this bad leg of mine again. Old Quidditch injury. Acts up at the worst of times."

"Old Quidditch injury my top-most grannie's last molar," Frank muttered, stacking the trunks on a shelf just inside the door. "You try pulling that gaf one more time and I'm going to charge you a galleon just for being a nuisance."

Ralph was reluctant to get onto the bus. "You say it's close? This headquarters place? Maybe we could, you know, walk?"

"In this cold?" Ted replied heartily.

"And with his bad leg?" Frank added sourly.

Ralph climbed on and had no sooner crossed the threshold when the doors slammed shut.

"Corner of Pancras and St. Chad's, Ernie." Ted called, grabbing a nearby brass handle.

The driver nodded, set his face grimly, gripped the steering wheel as if he meant to wrestle it, then punched the accelerator. Ralph, despite James' advice, had forgotten to grab onto something. The Knight Bus rocketed forward, throwing him backwards onto one of the brass beds that, strangely enough, seemed to occupy the lowest level of the bus instead of seats.

"Hmmp?" the sleeping wizard that Ralph had landed on muttered, raising his head from the pillow. "Grosvenor Square already?"

The bus performed an inconceivably tight hairpin turn, circling a group of tourists who were staring up at the departures board, then rocketed across the concourse again, whipping around businessmen and old ladies like a gust of wind. The glassed arch loomed over them, and James was certain the Knight Bus couldn't possibly fit through the open doorways, large as they were. Then he remembered that the bus had, indeed, come in through those doors. He braced himself. Without slowing, the bus squeezed through the door like a water balloon through a mouse-hole, popping out onto the crowded street and swerving wildly.

"I hear we're having goose for dinner tonight!" Ted called to James as the bus careened through a busy intersection.

"Yeah!" James called back. "Kreacher insisted on a full course meal our first night back!"

"Gotta love that ugly little brute!" Ted yelled appreciatively. "How's Ralph doing?"

James glanced around. Ralph was still sprawled on the bed with the sleeping wizard. "It's all right," he yelled, clutching the bed with both hands. "I threw up in the souvenir sleeping cap they gave me."

The Knight Bus screamed around the corner where St. Chad's Street met Argyle Square, then jammed to a halt. If anything, the sudden cessation of motion was as jarring as the ride itself. The gigantic purple bus sat quietly and primly, putting out a dainty cloud of exhaust. The doors shuttled open and Ted, Victoire, James and Ralph clambered out, the latter a little drunkenly. Frank, despite the rankled look he shot Ted, stacked their trunks carefully on the sidewalk and bid them a happy Christmas. The doors cranked shut and a moment later, the Knight Bus leapt down the street, streaking around a lorry and performing something rather like a pirouette at the intersection. Three seconds later, it was gone.

"That worked as well as could be expected." Ted said heartily, grabbing his and Victoire's trunks by the handle and yanking them toward a line of dilapidated row houses.

"What number is it?" Ralph said, puffing and dragging his huge trunk.

"Number twelve. Right here," James replied. He had been to the old headquarters so many times he'd forgotten that it was invisible to most people. Ralph stopped at the base of the steps, his brow furrowed and frowning.

"Oh yeah," James said, turning around. "OK, Ralph. You can't see it yet, but it's right here. Number twelve Grimmauld Place, right here between eleven and thirteen. It used to belong to my dad's

godfather, Sirius Black, but he willed it to dad. It was the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, back in the day when they were fighting Voldemort. They buried it with the best secrecy and disillusionment charms all the most powerful good wizards at the time could conjure. It was the best kept secret place of the Order, until right at the end, when a Death Eater followed my aunt here using side-along apparition. Anyway, it officially still belongs to dad, but we don't live here most of the time. Kreacher keeps it up when we're not here."

"I didn't understand about every third word of that," Ralph said, sighing, "but I'm cold. How do we get in?"

James reached down for Ralph's hand. Ralph gave it to him, and James pulled him up onto the first step of the landing leading into number twelve. Ralph stumbled, regained his footing and looked up. His eyes widened and a grin of delight spread across his face. James had no memory of his first visit to the old headquarters, but he knew from other people's descriptions how the doorway revealed itself the first time you arrived, how number twelve simply pushed numbers eleven and thirteen aside like a man shouldering his way through a crowd. James couldn't help grinning back at Ralph's wonderment.

"I love being a wizard." Ralph said meaningfully.

As James slammed the door, his mum strode quickly toward him from the hall, wiping her hands on a towel. "James!" she cried, gathering him into her arms and nearly yanking him off his feet.

"Mum," James said, embarrassed and pleased. "Come on, you're gonna melt the chocolate frog in my shirt pocket already."

"You're not too old to give your mum a kiss after being gone for four months, you know," she chided him.

"You know how it is," Ted exclaimed mournfully. "One moment they're yanking your apron strings, the next they're asking to borrow the broom to go snogging with some crumpet. Where *does* the time go?"

James's mum grinned, turning to Ted and embracing him as well. "Ted, you never change. Or shut up. Welcome. And you, too, Victoire. Adorable hat, by the way." Ralph groaned, but James' mum went on before Victoire could offer any pointed explanation. "And you are Ralph, of course. Harry mentioned you, and of course James has told me loads about you in his letters. My name's Ginny. I hear you are quite the wand master."

"Where is Dad, by the way?" James asked quickly, cutting Victoire off again.

"He picked up Andromeda after work today. They should be home soon enough. Everyone else will be here tomorrow."

“James!” two smaller voices chimed in unison, to the accompaniment of thundering footsteps. “Ted! Victoire!” Lily and Albus shoved past their mum. “What’d you bring us?” Albus demanded, stopping in front of James.

“Direct from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” James said grandly, “I bring you both... hugs!” He grabbed Albus in a bear hug. Albus pushed and struggled, simultaneously laughing and annoyed.

“No! I wanted some Droobles Best Blowing Gum from the cart lady! I told you!”

Ted squatted down and squeezed Lily. “I got you something you’ll love, my dear.”

“What is it?” she asked, suddenly shy.

“You’ll have to wait until Christmas, won’t you? Your mummy’s all stocked up on dragon kibble, isn’t she?”

“Ted Lupin!” Ginny snapped, “Don’t get her hopes up, you rogue. Now come on, all of you. Kreacher’s been in the basement all afternoon preparing what he calls ‘a fitting and proper tea service’. Don’t fill up, though, or you’ll not be hungry for the goose he cooked, and he’ll sulk all week.”

Harry and Ted’s grandmum, Andromeda Tonks, arrived half an hour later, and the rest of the evening was a whirlwind of food, happy laughter, and catching up. Harry and Ginny, it turned out, hadn’t even listened to the Hogwarts debate, despite what James had assumed. Andromeda Tonks had, though, and was full of endless vitriol for Tabitha Corsica and her team. Fortunately, she had no idea whatsoever that Ralph had also been on the team, and Ralph was all too happy to allow her to continue in that ignorance.

“Don’t worry,” Ted murmured to Ralph over dessert, “if anybody says anything, I’ll tell her you were a spy operating undercover. She loves espionage, does the old dear.”

Kreacher hadn’t changed a single iota. He bowed low to James, one hand over his heart, the other spread wide. “Master James, come back from his first year of schooling, he has,” he warbled in his bullfrog voice, “Kreacher has prepared master’s quarters just the way he likes them. Would master and his friend care for a watercress sandwich?”

Kreacher had, as usual, kept the house in exceptional order, and had even gone to the trouble to decorate for the holidays. Unfortunately, Kreacher’s concept of good cheer was a bit rustic, and the result would have amused Zane endlessly. The severed heads of the previous house elves, which hung permanently in the hallway as a testament to the original pureblood owners of the estate, had been dressed with fake white beards and conical green caps with jingle bells on the tips.

“Kreacher had bewitched them to sing holiday songs, too, he did,” Kreacher told James and Ralph a bit petulantly. “But the missus decided that that was perhaps a bit too... festive. Kreacher liked it, though, just the same.” He seemed to be angling to be allowed to reinstate the caroling heads. James assured

Kreacher that it had been a wonderfully inventive idea and he'd talk to his mum about it. He was, in fact, morbidly curious to see and hear the heads in action.

Both Lily and Albus followed James and Ralph around most of the night, begging to see what the boys could do with their newly learned skills.

"Come on, James!" Albus demanded, "Show us a levitation! Levitate Lily!"

"No!" Lily cried, "Levitate Albus! Fly him out the window!"

"You both know I can't do magic once I'm off the train and officially out of Hogwarts." James said wearily. "I'll get in trouble."

"Dad's Head Auror, you git. You probably won't even get a warning."

"It's irresponsible." James said seriously. "You get older and you'll know what that means."

"You can't do it, can you?" Albus taunted. "James can't do a levitation! Some wizard you are. First squib in the Potter family. Mum will die of shame."

"You're the same Albus-blabbus you ever were, you little skrewt."

"Don't call me that!"

"What, skrewt or Albus-blabbus?" James smiled. "You know Albus-blabbus is your real name, don't you? It's on your birth certificate. I saw it."

"Albus-blabbus!" Lily sang, dancing around her older brother.

Albus jumped on James, wrestling him to the floor.

Later, as James and Ralph headed to James' bedroom for the night, they passed a curtain that seemed to be drawn over a section of wall. A sleepy muttering came from behind it.

"Old Mrs. Black," James explained, "Crazy old nutter. Wigs out about people desecrating the house of her fathers and stuff every time she sees any of us. Dad and Neville have done everything they could think of to get the old bat off the wall, but she's stuck there right good. Even considered cutting out the section of wall with the portrait on it, but it's a main wall. Cutting her out would probably bring the next floor right down on top of us. Besides, strange as it may seem, Kreacher's rather attached to her, since she was his original owner. So I suppose she's part of the family forever."

Ralph peeked tentatively behind the curtain. He furrowed his brow. "Is she... watching television?"

James shrugged. "We discovered that a few years back. We had the front door open because we were moving in a new sofa. She saw a telly through the window across the street and shut right up for the first

time in weeks. So we hired a wizard artist to come and paint one right into her portrait. Crazy old bat loves the chat shows. Ever since then, well, she's been a lot more bearable."

Ralph slowly let the curtain drape back over the portrait. A man's voice behind it was saying, "And when did you first notice that your dog had tourette's syndrome, Mrs. Drakemont?"

Kreacher had arranged a cot for Ralph in James' room. His trunk was placed neatly at the end of it, and there was a ribbon-wrapped pinecone on each pillow, apparently Kreacher's idea of a Christmas mint.

"This used to be my dad's godfather's room," James said sleepily, once they had settled down.

"Cool," Ralph muttered, "Good guy, was he? Or was he a nutter, like the old witch in the portrait?"

"One of the best guys ever, according to Dad. We'll have to tell you about him sometime. He was wanted for murder for over a decade."

There was a minute of silence, and then Ralph's voice spoke in the darkness. "You wizards can be pretty bloody confusing, you know that?"

James grinned. A minute later, both of them were asleep.