



## 5. THE BOOK OF AUSTRAMADDUX

“Don’t think of it as looking like a miserable failure on a broomstick,” Zane said afterwards as they all sat in the Ravenclaw common room. “Think of it as giving Ralphie here a chance to look positively brilliant!”

James said nothing. He sat slumped at the end of the couch, his head propped miserably on his hand.

“Besides, if I hadn’t hopped on my broomstick and took off after you, I don’t think I’d have been able to figure it out at all. It was just a matter of not thinking about it, really.”

“Spectacular stuff out there, Walker,” an older student said as he passed the couch, ruffling Zane’s damp hair.

“Yeah,” Another one said from across the room. “Normally, first years tryouts are just for laughs. With you, we get the laughs *and* the skills.” There was a round of laughter and scattered applause. Zane beamed, soaking it up.

“Seriously, though,” Ralph said from where he sat on the floor, his back to the fire. “How’d you do that? Flying is supposed to be pretty tough to master.”

“I dunno, honestly,” Zane said. “I saw James heading into the stratosphere and I just took off after him. I hardly even knew I was doing it until the very end, when I realized I was nose-diving straight into the pitch. I pulled up at the last second, just as the human torpedo here went past me, and I thought, ‘look at me! I’m flying!’ Maybe it was all those racing games and flight simulators I grew up playing with my dad. The feel of it all just made sense to me.” Zane suddenly seemed to realize this conversation wasn’t lifting James’s mood much. “But enough about me and my broom. What about *you*, Ralphie?”

Ralph blinked thoughtfully, and then picked up his wand from where it lay on his wet cloak. It was just as huge and ridiculous as always, still with the tip whittled down and painted lime green, but nobody was laughing at it anymore. “I don’t know. It’s like you said, isn’t it? I just didn’t think about it. I saw James falling and I thought of the feather in Flitwick’s class. Next thing I know, I’m pointing my wand at him and yelling—“

Several students, including Zane, ducked and called out as Ralph flicked his wand ahead of him. Ralph smiled sheepishly. “Get a grip, everybody. I wasn’t gonna say it.”

“Ralph, you’re the real deal, mate,” Zane said, recovering. “You went from floating a feather to a human body in one class, you know? My boy’s got talent.”

James stirred. “If you two are done congratulating yourselves, I’m gonna go find a hole and live in it for the rest of the year.”

“Hey, I’ll bet Grawp’s girlfriend has room in her cave,” Ralph said. Zane did a double-take at Ralph, open mouthed.

“What?” Ralph said. “It’ll save him some time looking!”

“He’s joking,” Zane said, glancing at James. “I couldn’t tell at first.”

“Congratulations on making the team,” James said quietly, standing and collecting his cloak from a hook by the fire.

“Hey, really,” Zane said awkwardly. “I’m sorry about how things worked out. I didn’t know it was that important to you. Really.”

James stood still for several seconds, staring into the fire. Zane’s expression of regret struck him deeply. His heart ached. His face heated and his eyes burned. He blinked and looked away.

“It wasn’t that important to me, really,” he said. “It was just really, really important.”

As the door closed behind James, he heard Ralph say, “So who was it important to?”

James walked slowly, his head down. His clothes were still damp, and his body ached from the jolt of Ralph levitating him at the end of his long dive, but he barely noticed those things. He had failed. After the victory of becoming a Gryffindor, he'd been cautiously confident that Quidditch, too, would work out. Instead, he'd ended up looking like a complete fool in front of both the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. Far from the spectacular aerobatic displays his dad had legendarily performed, James had to be rescued from killing himself. There was no surviving this kind of failure. He'd never live it down. Nobody was making fun of him now, at least to his face, but what would they say next year when he showed up for tryouts again? He couldn't even bear to think about it.

How would he tell his dad? His dad, who would be coming at the beginning of next week to see him and hear of his exploits? He'd understand, of course. He'd tell James Quidditch didn't matter, that the important thing was for him to be himself and have fun. And he'd even mean it. And still, knowing that didn't make James feel any better.

Zane had made the Ravenclaw team, though. James felt a stab of bitter jealousy at that. He felt immediately sorry for it, but that didn't make the jealousy go away. Zane was Muggle-born. And an American, to boot! Quidditch was supposed to be a baffling mystery to him, and James was supposed to be the instinctive flyer, the rescuing hero. Not the other way around. How could things have gone so totally wrong so fast?

When he reached the Gryffindor common room, James ducked around the edge of the room, avoiding the eyes of those gathered there, laughing with their friends, listening to music, discussing homework, snogging on the couch. He ducked up the stairs and into the sleeping chamber, which was dark and quiet. Back in his dad's day, the dorms had been separated by year. Now, James was glad that he shared the room with some of the older years. They usually brought reassurance that all of this was survivable. He needed some of that reassurance now, or at least someone to notice his misery and validate it. He sighed deeply in the empty room.

James washed up in the little bathroom, changed, then sat on his bed, looking out into the night. Nobby watched him from his cage by the window, clicking his beak from time to time, wanting to get outside and find a mouse or two, but James didn't notice him. The rain had finally exhausted itself. The clouds were breaking up, revealing a great silvery moon. James watched it for a long time, not knowing what he was waiting for, not even really knowing he was waiting. In the end, what he was waiting for didn't happen. No one came upstairs. He heard their voices below. It was Friday night. Nobody else was going to bed early. He felt utterly lonely and bereft. He slid under the covers and stared out at the moon from there.

Eventually, he slept.

James spent most of his weekend moping about in the Gryffindor Common room. He knew that neither Ralph nor Zane could get into the common room without the password, and he was in no mood to see them or anyone else. He read his assigned homework chapters and practiced some wand-work. He was particularly annoyed to discover that he couldn't get his practice feather to do any more than scuttle pathetically around the table. After twenty minutes, he grew exasperated, growled a word his mother didn't know he knew, and slammed his wand onto the table. It shot a stream of purple sparks, as if surprised at James' outburst.

Saturday night's detention with Argus Filch came. James found himself following Filch around the corridors with a bucket and a giant, stiff-bristled scrubbing brush. Occasionally, Filch would stop and, without turning, point at a spot on the floor, the wall, or a detail of a statue. James would look and there would be a bit of graffiti, or a patch of long trodden-upon gum. James would sigh, dip the brush, and begin to scrub with both hands. Filch treated James as if he was personally responsible for each bit of defacing he scrubbed. As James worked, Filch muttered and fumed, lamenting about the much better sorts of punishments he had been permitted to mete out in years past. By the time James was allowed to return to his rooms, his fingers were cold, red and sore, and smelled of Filch's ugly brown soap.

On Sunday afternoon, James went for a moody wander around the grounds and ran into Ted and Petra, who were lounging on a blanket, ostensibly working out star charts on sheets of parchment.

"Now that Trelawney's sharing Divination class with Madame Delacroix, we have actual homework." Ted complained. "Used to be we just had to look at some tea leaves and make up doom and gloom predictions. That was kind of fun, actually."

Petra was leaning against a tree, shuffling maps and charts on her lap, comparing them to a huge book of constellations that lay open on the blanket. "Unlike Trelawney, Delacroix seems to have the quaint notion that Astrology is a hard science," she said, shaking her head in disgust. "How a bunch of rocks rolling around in space know anything about my future is beyond me."

Ted told James to stick around and keep them from getting too much done. Sensing that he wasn't interrupting anything personal, and that neither Ted nor Petra were going to bring up James' disastrous Quidditch tryouts, James flopped onto the blanket and peered at the book of star-charts. Black and white drawings of planets, each emblazoned with names and illustrations of mythical creatures, circled and spun slowly on the pages, their orbits drawn as red ellipses.

"Which one of these planets is the Wocket from?" James asked drily.

Petra turned a page, "Hardy-har."

James turned the enormous pages of the constellation book slowly, examining the moving planets and other-worldly astrological symbols. “So how do Professor Trelawney and Madame Delacroix get along, then?” James asked after a minute. He remembered Damien implying there would be some friction between them.

“Oil and water,” Ted replied. “Trelawney tries to make nice, but she obviously hates the voodoo queen. For Delacroix’s part, she doesn’t even pretend to like Trelawney. They’re from two different schools of thought, in every sense of the word.”

“I like Trelawney’s school better,” Petra muttered, scribbling a note on her parchment.

“We all know what you think, dear.” Ted soothed. He turned to James. “Petra likes Trelawney because she knows that, at its heart, Divination is really just a set of random variables that you use to order your own thinking. Trelawney thinks it’s all mystical, of course, but she still knows it’s just a bunch of totally subjective mumbo-jumbo. Petra is a facts girl, so she likes that even if Trelawney takes all this stuff seriously, she doesn’t try to make it, you know, rigid.”

Petra sighed and clapped her book shut. “Divination isn’t science. It’s psychology. At least Trelawney gets that in practice, if not in belief. Delacroix...” She threw the book onto the pile next to her, rolling her eyes.

“We have a test this week.” Ted said mournfully. “An actual divination test. It’s all about some crazy astrological event that’s happening later this year. The linings of the planets or whatever.”

James looked quizzical, “The linings of the planets?”

“*Alignment* of the planets,” Petra said patiently. “Actually, it is a pretty big deal. It only happens once every few hundred years. *That’s* science. Knowing what silly mythical creature each planet represents, what it was a god of to some bunch of dotty primitives, and what it means to ‘the harmonics of the Astrological precognition matrix’- isn’t.”

Ted looked at James and frowned. “Someday we’ll get Petra to reveal her true feelings about it.”

Petra smacked him over the head with one of the larger star charts.

Later, at dinner, James saw Zane and Ralph sitting together at the Ravenclaw table. He saw Zane look over once, and was glad that he didn’t try to come over and talk to him. He knew it was extremely petty of him, but he was still sick with jealousy and the shame of his embarrassment. He ate quickly, and then wandered out of the Great Hall, unsure where he would go.

The evening was pleasant and cool as the sun dipped behind the mountains. James explored the perimeter of the grounds, listening to the song of the crickets and throwing stones into the lake. He went to knock on the door to Hagrid’s cabin, but there was a note on the door, written in large, clumsy letters. The note said that Hagrid was up in the forest until Monday morning. Spending time with Grawp and Grawp’s

lady giant friend, James figured. It was beginning to get dark. James turned and headed dejectedly back in the direction of the castle.

He was on his way up to the common room when he decided to make a side trip. He was curious about something.

The trophy case was lit with a series of lanterns, so that the cups, plaques and statues each glinted brightly. James walked slowly along, looking in at the team photos of decades-past Quidditch teams, their uniforms outdated but their smiles and expressions of hearty invincibility eternally unchanged. There were gold and bronze trophies, antique snitches, game bludgers strapped down with leather belts but still wiggling slightly as he passed.

James stopped near the end and looked in at the Triwizard Tournament display. His dad smiled the same uncomfortable smile, looking impossibly young and unruly. James leaned in and looked at the picture on the other side of the Triwizard Cup, the one of Cedric Diggory. The boy in the picture was handsome, guileless, with the same expression on his face that James had seen in the old Quidditch team photos, that expression of perpetual youth and seamless confidence. James studied the photo. The expression was what had kept him from making the connection the first time he'd seen the picture.

"It was you, wasn't it." James whispered to the picture. It wasn't really a question.

The boy in the picture smiled his smile, nodding slightly, as if in agreement.

James hadn't expected an answer, but as he started to straighten up, something changed on the plaque below the Triwizard Cup. The engraved words sank into the silver plaque, then, after a moment, new words surfaced. They spelled out slowly, silently.

*James Potter*

*Harry's son*

A shiver thrilled down James' back. He nodded. "Yes," he whispered.

The words sank back into nothing. Several seconds went by, and then more words drifted up.

*How long*

*Has it been*

James didn't understand the question at first. He shook his head slightly. "I... I'm sorry. How long has it been since what?"

The letters receded and spelled again, slowly, as if they took great effort.

*Since I died*

James swallowed. "I don't know, exactly. Seventeen or eighteen years, I think."

The letters faded out very slowly. No more formed for almost a minute. Then:

*Time is so strange here*

*It feels longer*

*Shorter*

James didn't know what to say. A sense of great loneliness and sadness had crept into the corridor, filling the space, and James himself, like a cool cloud.

"My-" James' voice caught. He cleared his throat, swallowed, and tried again. "My dad and mum, Ginny, used to be Weasley... they talk about you. Sometimes. They... they remember you. They liked you."

The letters faded, surfaced.

*Ginny and Harry*

*I always knew*

*There was something there*

Cedric's ghost seemed to be seeping away, leaking out of the air of the corridor. The letters faded slowly. James had wanted to ask more questions, had meant to ask about the Muggle intruder, how he was getting in, but now it seemed unimportant. He just wanted to say something to lessen the pall of sadness he'd sensed in Cedric's presence, but he couldn't think of anything. Then the letters came once more, spelling out very faintly and slowly.

*Are they happy*

James read the question, considered it. He nodded. "Yeah, Cedric. They are. *We* are."

The letters evaporated as soon as James spoke, and there was something like a sigh all around him, long and somehow exhausted. When it was over, James glanced around the corridor. He could tell he was alone again. When he looked back at the plaque below the Triwizard Cup, it had reverted to its normal state, covered in elaborate, engraved words. James shivered, hugged himself, then turned and began to walk back toward the main hall. The ghost had finally spoken, and it was Cedric Diggory.

*We are happy*, James thought. As he climbed the steps to the common room, he realized it was true. He felt a little silly about the way he'd mooned around all weekend, stirring his jealousy and sense of failure like a stew. At this moment, it all seemed unimportant. He was just glad to be here, at Hogwarts, with new friends, challenges, endless adventures before him. He ran along the hallway to the portrait hole, wanting nothing more at that moment than to spend the last couple of hours of his first weekend at Hogwarts having

some fun, laughing, forgetting the silliness of the whole Quidditch disaster. He realized, reluctantly, that on some level, it was even a little funny.

As he entered the common room, he stopped and looked around. Ralph and Zane were there, sitting with the rest of the Gremlins around the table by the window. They all looked up.

“There’s our little alien,” Zane said happily. “We’re trying to work your broom-handling skills into the routine. What do you think of a Roswell-crash kinda gig? Ralph’s got his wand all ready to catch you.”

Ralph wiggled his wand and smiled sheepishly. James rolled his eyes and went to join them.

James awoke late Monday morning. He ran into the Great Hall hoping to grab a piece of toast before Transfiguration class and met Ralph and Zane, who were just coming out.

“No time, mate.” Ralph said, hooking James’ arm and turning him around. “Can’t be late to first class. McGonagall teaches it and I’ve heard bad, bad things about what she does to tardy students.”

James sighed and trotted along with them through the noisy, busy corridors. “I hope she doesn’t do terrible things to students whose stomachs growl during class as well.”

Zane handed something to James as they walked. “Check that out when you get a chance. I already showed it to Ralphie and it blew his mind, didn’t it? I’ve marked the spot for you.” It was a thick, bedraggled book. The cover was clothbound in frayed fabric that had once probably been red. The pages were yellowed, threatening to fall out of the binding in chunks.

“What is it?” James said, unable to read the embossed title, which was ghostly faint with age. “Between Jackson and Flitwick, I’ve got enough reading to last me until next term.”

“You’ll be interested in this, believe me. It’s the *Book of Parallel Histories*, volume seven.” Zane said. “I got it from the Ravenclaw library. Just read the section I marked.”

“Ravenclaw has a private library?” Ralph asked, struggling to wrestle his Transfiguration textbook out of his overstuffed backpack.



“Do you Slytherins have dragon’s heads on your walls?” Zane shrugged. “Sure. To each his own.”

As they filed toward the Transfiguration classroom, they passed through a cluster of students standing beside the door. Several of them wore the blue “Question the Victors” badges. More and more students seemed to be wearing them as the days went by. Signs on some of the bulletin boards had identified the badges as the mark of a club called “The Progressive Element”. James was dismayed to see that not all of the students wearing them were Slytherins.

“You’re dad’s coming today, eh Potter?” An older boy called out, smiling crookedly. “Going to have a little meeting with his cronies from the States?”

James stopped and looked at the speaker. “He’s coming today, yeah.” he said, his cheeks going red. “But I don’t know what you mean about his ‘cronies’. He hasn’t even met the Americans before. Maybe you should read a little before you open your mouth.”

“Oh, we’ve been reading, believe me.” the boy replied, his smile disappearing. “More than you and your father would like us to be, I’m sure. *Your* kind can’t hide the truth forever.”

“Hide the truth?” James said, anger overcoming his caution. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Read the badges, Potter. You know exactly what we’re talking about.” the boy said, hoisting his backpack and moving casually down the hall with his friends. “And if you don’t, you’re even stupider than you look.” He turned his back on James.

James blinked in anger and amazement. “What was that all about?”

Ralph sighed. “Come on, let’s get a seat. I’ll tell you, although I don’t understand much of it myself.”

But they had no time to discuss it before class. Headmistress McGonagall, who had taught Transfiguration to James’s mum and dad, taught it still, and with apparently the same degree of businesslike briskness. She explained the basic wand motions and commands, illustrating by transforming a book into a herring sandwich. She even asked one of the students, a boy named Carson, to eat a portion of the sandwich. Afterward, she transformed the sandwich back into the book and showed the class that the book still bore the bite marks Carson had made. There were sounds of awe and amusement. Carson looked at the bitten chunks and pressed his hand to his stomach, a look of thoughtful dismay on his face. Near the end of class, McGonagall instructed the students to produce their wands and practice the motions and commands on a banana, which they were to attempt to transfigure into a peach.

“*Persica Alteramus*’, emphasis on first syllables only. Don’t expect to make much progress your first time.” she called over the noise of the students’ attempts. “If you produce even a banana with a hint of peach fuzz, we will consider that a success for today. Do be careful, Miss Majaris! Small circular flicks only, please!”

Zane stared furiously at his banana and flicked his wand at it. "*Persica Alteramus!*" There was no apparent change. He pressed his lips together. "Let's see you try, James."

Shrugging, James raised his wand and flicked it, speaking the command. The banana flopped over, but remained decidedly a banana.

"Maybe they're transforming on the inside," Zane said hopefully. "Maybe we should peel it and see if it's all peachy in there, eh?"

James thought about it, and then shook his head. They both tried again. Ralph watched. "More wrist movement. You guys look like you're directing jetliners."

"So easy to criticize, so hard to create," Zane said between attempts. "Let's see you have a go, Ralphinator."

Ralph seemed reluctant to try. He fingered his wand, keeping it under the edge of the desk.

"Come on, Ralph," James said. "You've been pretty excellent at wand-work so far. What are you worried about?"

"Nothing," Ralph said, a little defensively. "I don't know."

"Rats!" Zane said, dropping his wand arm and grabbing the banana with the other. He plunked his wand onto the table and pointed the banana at it. "Maybe I'd have better luck doing it this way, you think?"

James and Ralph stared at him. He rolled his eyes. "Oh, sheesh, come on Ralph. Make with the peach. You know you can do it. What are you waiting for?"

Ralph grimaced, then sighed and raised his gigantic wand. He flicked it lightly at his banana and said the command flatly, almost as if he was trying to get it wrong. There was a flash and a noise like a pine knot exploding in a fireplace. The rest of the class heard the noise and glanced over at Ralph. A puff of heavy smoke lingered on the table in front of Ralph, who had pushed back from it, his eyes wide and troubled. As the smoke dissipated, James leaned in. Ralph's banana was still lying there, completely untouched.

"Well," Zane said into the sudden silence. "That was a whole lotta--"

A small, squishy noise came from Ralph's banana. The peel split slowly and began to separate, opening like a pulpy yellow flower. There was a prolonged gasp from the students as a green tendril grew out of the center of the peeling banana. It seemed to sniff the air as it grew, twisting and lengthening like a vine. The tendril began to straighten as it rose, snaking up from the table with a graceful, writhing motion. More tendrils came out of the banana. They spread along the surface in a starburst pattern, found the edges of the table and curled under them, gripping tightly. Branches began to separate from the main shoot as it grew, thickening and turning lighter, until it was a woody, yellowish grey. Foliage sprouted from the branches in great, sudden bursts, growing from tender shoots to full leaf in a matter of seconds. Finally, as the tree

reached a height of about four feet, there came a series of soft pops. Half a dozen peaches sprouted from the ends of the lower branches, weighing them down. Each one was fuzzy, plump and pristine.

James tore his glance away from the tree and looked around the room. Every eye was on the perfect little peach tree Ralph had conjured, mouths dropped open, wand-hands still frozen in mid-flick. Headmistress McGonagall stared at the tree intently, her mouth a frown of complete surprise. Then, motion returned to the room. Everyone exhaled and spontaneous, awed applause broke out.

“He’s mine!” Zane called, standing and throwing an arm around Ralph’s shoulders, “I saw him first!” Ralph broke his eyes away from the tree, looked at Zane and smiled rather blankly. But James remembered the look on Ralph’s face when the tree was growing. He hadn’t been smiling then.

Moments later, in the corridor outside, Zane spoke through a mouthful of peach. “Seriously, Ralph. You’re creeping me out a bit, here. That’s some serious wizarding you’ve got going on. What’s the deal?”

Ralph smiled his uncertain, worried smile again. “Well, actually…”

James looked at Ralph. “What? Tell, Ralph!”

“All right,” he said, stopping and pulling them into a windowed alcove. “But this is just a guess, right?”

James and Zane nodded enthusiastically, gesturing for Ralph to go on.

“I’ve been practicing a lot with some of the other Slytherins at night, you know.” Ralph explained. “Just the basic stuff. They’ve been teaching me a few things. Disarming spells and some tricks and pranks, stuff to pull on your enemies.”

“What enemies have you got already, Ralph?” Zane asked incredulously, licking peach juice from his fingers.

Ralph flapped his hand impatiently. “You know, just average enemies. It’s just the way the guys in my House talk. Anyway, they say I’m better than average. They think I’m not really just a plain old Muggle kid who got some random magic genes. They think maybe one of my parents is from one of the great wizarding families and just don’t know it.”

“Seems like a pretty big thing not to know, doesn’t it?” James said doubtfully. “I mean, you said your dad made Muggle computer stuff, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah, him,” Ralph said dismissively, and then dropped his voice. “But my mum… I didn’t tell you guys she was dead, did I? No,” he answered himself. “Of course not. Well, she is. She died when I was really little. I never even knew her. What if she was a witch? I mean, what if she was from one of the great old pureblood wizarding families and my dad never even knew it? It happens, you know. Magic types

fall in love with Muggles and can never tell them the secret their whole lives. Pureblood types don't like it, I guess, but still..." He trailed off and looked back and forth at Zane and James.

"Well," James said slowly. "Sure. I guess it's possible. Stranger things have happened."

Zane raised his eyebrows, considering. "Would explain a lot, wouldn't it? Maybe you're, like, a prince or something. Maybe you're heir to fabulous riches and power and stuff!"

Ralph grimaced and stepped out of the alcove. "Let's not get carried away. It's just a guess, like I said."

James walked with Zane and Ralph until it was time for his next class. Neither of the other two had Herbology class with him, so he told them he'd see them that afternoon and struck off across the grounds toward the greenhouses.

Professor Longbottom greeted James by name as he entered, smiling warmly. James had always liked Neville, even though he was much quieter and thoughtful than his dad or uncle Ron. James knew the stories of how Neville had fought back during his last year of school, when Voldemort had taken over the Ministry and Hogwarts had been under his control. In the end, Neville had been the one to cut off the head of the great snake, Nagini, Voldemort's last link to immortality. Still, it was hard to imagine the gaunt and rather clumsy Professor doing such things as he arranged pots and planters on the table at the front of the greenhouse classroom.

"Herbology is," Neville began, gesturing and knocking over one of the smaller pots. He interrupted himself, righting the pot quickly, spilling dirt onto his papers. He looked up and smiled in a harried sort of way. "Herbology is the study of... well, herbs, of course. As you can see." He nodded to the greenhouse at large, which was packed with hundreds of plants and trees, all growing in a bewildering variety of containers. James thought Professor Longbottom would probably be quite interested in examining the peach tree currently growing on the Transfiguration room table.

"Herbs are the root, er, so to speak, of much of the most fundamental practices of magic. Potions, medicine, wand construction, even many charms, all rely on the essential cultivation and processing of magical plants. In this class, we will be studying the many uses of some of our most important vegetable resources, from the lowly *Bubotuber* to the rare *Mimulus Mimbletonia*."

Out of the corner of James' eye, he saw something moving. A plant was spreading a vine along a windowsill next to a first year girl, who was furiously scribbling the names Neville was listing off. The vine separated from the windowsill, tapped lightly along her back, then curled into her earring. The girl's eyes widened and she dropped her quill as the vine began to pull.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow!" she cried, scrambling sideways off her chair and clapping a hand to her ear. Neville looked around, saw the girl and came bounding towards her.

“Yes, grab the vine, Miss Patonia! That’s right.” He reached her and began to carefully extract the vine from her earring. It twisted slowly as he pried it loose. “You’ve discovered our *Larcenous Ligulous*, or rather it has discovered you. I apologize for not warning you before you sat down. Bred by pirates several hundred years ago because of its innate attraction to sparkly objects, which it uses to magnify sunlight for photosynthetic purposes. Nearly extinct, after having been systematically hunted and burned during the Purges.” Neville found the base of the plant and wrapped the vine methodically around it, pinning its tip into the dirt with a diamond topped hoop. Patonia rubbed her ear and stared at the vine as if she’d like to do some burning of her own.

Neville returned to the front table and began talking the class through the long line of potted plants he’d arranged there. James yawned. The heat of the greenhouse was making him rather drowsy. In an attempt to stay awake, James reached to get his parchment and quill from his backpack. His hand bumped the book Zane had given him. He pulled it out, along with his parchments, and cradled it in his lap. When he was sure Neville had descended deep enough into talking about his favorite subject not to notice, James opened the book to where Zane had marked it. His interest was immediately piqued by the heading at the top of the page: *Feodre Austramaddux*. He leaned over the book and read quickly.

Proponent of Reverse Precognition, or the art of recording history through counter-chronological divination, the seer and historian Austramaddux remains known to modern wizardry mainly for his fantastic accounts of the last days of Merlinus Ambrosius, legendary sorcerer and founder of the Order of Merlin. Austramaddux’s account, which is recorded in its entirety in his famous *Inverse Historie of the Magickal Worlde*, (see chapter twelve) deals with his acquaintance with Merlinus at the end of the latter’s career as special magical regent to the Kings of Europe. Having grown disenchanted with the corruption of the magical world as it became ‘infected’ by influences from the growing non-magical kingdoms, Merlinus announced his plan to ‘quit the earthly realm’. Further, he claimed he would return to the society of men, centuries or even millennia later, when the balance between the magical and non-magical worlds was more, as Austramaddux put it, ‘ripe for his ministrations’. These predictions have been the source of many plots and conspiracies in the centuries since, usually led by those of a revolutionary bent, who believe that the return of Merlinus would facilitate their plans to overcome and subjugate the non-magical world via politics or outright war.

James stopped reading. His mind was racing as he considered the implications of what he’d just read. He’d known of Merlin his whole life, in much the same way that Muggle children knew about Saint Nicholas; not as a historical figure, but as a sort of mythical cartoon character. It had never occurred to James to doubt that Merlin had been a real person, but it had also never occurred to him to wonder what kind of a man Merlin might have been. His only references were silly sayings he’d grown up with, like “by Merlin’s beard”, or “what in the name of Merlin’s pants”, none of which implied much about the character of the great sorcerer. According to Austramaddux, Merlin had been a sort of magical advisor to Muggle kings and leaders.

Was it possible that, in Merlin's time, witches and wizards lived openly in the Muggle world, with no laws of secrecy, no hiding, no disillusionment charms? And if so, what did Merlin mean by saying the wizarding world had been "infected" by the Muggles? Even more, what had he meant by the creepy prediction that he'd return when the world was "ripe for his ministrations"? It was no wonder that dark wizards through history had tried to make Merlin's prediction come true, to bring the great sorcerer back into the world somehow. Dark wizards had always sought to rule the Muggle world, and apparently there was some basis to believe that Merlin, the greatest and most powerful wizard of all time, would help them bring that about.

A sudden thought occurred to James, and his eyes widened. He had first heard the name Austramaddux via a profile created by a Slytherin. Slytherin had always been the House of dark wizards intent on domination of the Muggle world. What if the enigmatic mention of Austramaddux wasn't just a meaningless coincidence? What if it was a sign of a new dark plot? What if the Slytherin who had made that profile was part of a plot to facilitate the predicted return of Merlinus Ambrosius, who would lead a final war against the Muggle world?

James closed the book slowly and gritted his teeth. Somehow, the moment he thought of it, it seemed completely true. That explained why a Slytherin would use a name that even his head of House thought was a joke. The Slytherin knew it wasn't, and would soon be victorious in a plot that would prove it. James' heart pounded as he sat and thought furiously. Who could he tell? Zane and Ralph, of course. They might have already thought of it. His dad? James decided that he couldn't. Not yet, at least. James was old enough to know that most adults wouldn't believe such a story from a kid even if the kid could provide pictures that proved it.

James didn't know exactly what he could do to stop such a plot, but he knew what he had to do next. He had to find out who the Slytherin was that had taken Ralph's GameDeck. He had to find the Slytherin that used the name Austramaddux.

With that in mind, James bolted from the greenhouse as soon as class was over, forgetting entirely that tonight was the night his dad, Harry Potter, was arriving for his meeting with the Americans.

As James ran across the grounds, he became aware of the noise of a crowd. He slowed, listening. Shouts and chants mingled with the babble of raucous, excited voices. As he turned the corner into the

courtyard, the noise became much louder. A mob of students roiled around the courtyard, gathering from all directions even as James watched. Most were simply curious to see what the commotion was about, but there was a very active group in the center, marching, chanting slogans, some holding large, hand-painted signs and banners. James saw one of the banners as he approached crowd, and his heart sank. It read “End Ministry Auror Fascism” Another sign waved and poked at the sky: “Tell the TRUTH Harry Potter!”

James circled around the group, trying to stay inconspicuous. Near the steps of the Main Hall, Tabitha Corsica was being interviewed by a woman with garish purple cat’s-eye glasses and an overly-attentive expression. With growing unease, James recognized her as Rita Skeeter, lead investigative reporter for the *Daily Prophet*, and one of his dad’s least favorite people.

As he passed, Tabitha glanced sideways at him and made a slight shrug and smile, as if to say *so sorry about this, but these are hard times and we all do what we must...*

Just as James was about to climb the steps into the Main Hall, the headmistress appeared, striding purposefully into the sunlight with a very grim expression on her face. She placed her wand to her throat and spoke from the top step, her voice echoing all around the courtyard, cutting through the noise of the crowd.

“I won’t ask what the meaning of this is, as I find it disappointingly obvious,” she said sternly, and James, who had known Minerva McGonagall in a peripheral way for most of his life, thought he had never seen her so enraged. Her face was deathly pale, with livid red high on her cheeks. Her voice, still ringing around the courtyard, was controlled but steely with conviction. “Far be it from me to disabuse you of the right to maintain whatever ill-founded and preposterous notions many of you might have picked up, but let me assure you, regardless of what you might choose to believe, it is not the policy of this school to allow students to insult esteemed guests.”

The signs sagged, but did not lower completely. James saw that Rita Skeeter was staring up at the headmistress with a look of hungry excitement on her face, her Quick Quotes Quill scribbling wildly on a pad of parchment. McGonagall sighed, gathering her composure. “There are proper avenues for expression of disagreement, as you all know. This... *display*... is neither necessary nor appropriate. I expect you all, therefore, to disperse immediately with the knowledge that you have most certainly-” she allowed her gaze to fall upon Rita Skeeter. “-made your point.”

“Madame Headmistress?” A voice called, and James didn’t need to turn to know that it was Tabitha Corsica. There was a pregnant silence as the entire courtyard held its breath. James could hear Rita Skeeter’s quill scratching avidly.

McGonagall paused, studying Tabitha meaningfully. “Yes, Miss Corsica?”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Ma’am.” Corsica said smoothly, her beautiful voice echoing around the courtyard. “And for my own part, I hope that we can all choose to pursue these issues in a more reasonable and relevant manner, as you suggest. Might it be too soon to propose that we make this the

subject of the first All-School Topical Debate? That would allow us to approach this sensitive issue respectfully and thoroughly, in the manner I'm sure you'd agree it deserves."

McGonagall's jaw was like iron as she stared down at Corsica. The pause was so long that Tabitha actually looked away. She glanced around the courtyard, her composure faltering slightly. The Quick Quotes Quill had caught up to the proceedings. It hovered over the parchment, waiting.

"I appreciate your suggestion, Miss Corsica," McGonagall said flatly, "but this is neither the time nor the place for discussion of the debate team calendar, as you can surely imagine. And now," she let her gaze sweep over the courtyard critically. "I consider the matter closed. Anyone who wishes to continue this discussion may do so much more comfortably in the privacy of their rooms. I'd advise you to be off now, before I send Mr. Filch out to take a census."

The crowd began to break up. McGonagall saw James, and her expression changed. "Come along, Potter," she said, beckoning impatiently. James climbed the steps and followed her back into the shadow of the Hall. McGonagall was muttering angrily, her tartan robes swishing as she stalked into a side corridor. She seemed to expect James to follow, so he did.

"Ridiculous rabble-rousing propagandists," she fumed, still leading James into what he recognized as the staff offices. "James, I'm sorry you had to witness that. But I'm even sorrier that such an ugly bit of rumor-mongering has found a foothold within these walls."

McGonagall turned and opened a door without breaking stride. James found himself entering a large room full of couches and chairs, small tables and bookshelves, all arranged haphazardly around an enormous marble fireplace. And there, standing to greet him with a crooked smile was his dad. James grinned and ran past McGonagall.

"James," Harry Potter said delightedly, pulling the boy into a rough hug and ruffling his hair. "My boy. I'm so glad to see you, son. How's school?"

James shrugged, smiling happily but feeling suddenly shy. There were several other people present he didn't recognize, all of them looking at him as he stood with his father.

"You all know my boy James," Harry said, squeezing James' shoulder. "James, these are some representatives from the Ministry who've come along with me. You remember Titus Hardcastle, don't you? And this is Mr. Recreant and Miss Sacarhina. They both work for the Office of Ambassadorial Relations."

James shook hands dutifully. He did remember Titus Hardcastle when he looked at him, although he hadn't seen him for a long time. Hardcastle, one of his dad's head aurors, was squat and thick, with a square head and very tough, weathered features. Mr. Recreant was tall and thin, dressed rather fussily in pinstriped robes and a black derby. His handshake was quick and loose, rather like holding a dead starfish. Miss Sacarhina, however, didn't shake hands. She smiled hugely at James and squatted down to his level, examining him up and down.



“I see so much of your parents in you, young man,” she said, tilting her head and affecting a conspiratorial manner. “Such promise and potential. I do hope you’ll be joining us for the evening.”

In answer, James looked up at his dad. Harry smiled and put both hands on James’ shoulders. “We’re having dinner tonight with the Alma Alerons. Do you want to come along? Apparently we’re having true American food, which could mean anything from hamburgers to, well, cheeseburgers, as far as I can guess.”

“Sure!” James said, smiling. Harry Potter smiled back and winked.

“But first,” he said, addressing the rest of the group. “We’ll be joining our friends from Alma Aleron for a look at some of their proprietary magic. We’re due to meet them in the next ten minutes, and I’ve asked a few others to join us as well. Shall we?”

“I’ll not be joining you, I’m afraid,” McGonagall said briskly. “It appears that I will need to be keeping a close tab on certain elements of the student populace during your tour, Mr. Potter. I apologize.”

“Understood, Minerva,” Harry said. It always sounded strange to James that his dad called the headmistress by her first name, but she seemed to expect it from him. “Do what you have must, but don’t worry about squashing every little outburst. It’s hardly worth the effort.”

“I’m not sure I agree with you about that, Harry, but I expect I’d not be able to maintain perfect order regardless. I shall see you this evening, then.” With that, the headmistress turned and left the room brusquely, still fuming.

“Shall we then?” Miss Sacarhina inquired. The group began to move toward a door on the opposite side of the room. As they walked, Harry bent toward his son and whispered. “I’m glad you’ll be coming along tonight. Sacarhina and Recreant aren’t exactly the most pleasant travelling companions, but Percy insisted I bring them. I’m afraid this whole affair’s gone all political.”

James nodded wisely, not knowing what that meant, but happy to be invited into his dad’s confidence, as always. “So how’d you travel?”

“Floo network,” Harry answered. “Didn’t want to make any more visible entry than necessary. Minerva warned us about the demonstration the P.E. types were planning.”

It took James a moment to realize his dad was talking about the Progressive Element. “She knows about those guys?” he asked, surprised.

His dad put a finger to his lips, nodding slightly toward Sacarhina and Recreant, who were ahead of them, talking in low voices as they walked. “Later,” Harry mouthed.

After a few turns, Mr. Recreant opened a large door and stepped out into sunlight, the rest following. They descended a broad stone stairway which led down to a grassy area bordered by the Forbidden Forest on

one side and a low stone wall on the other. Neville Longbottom and Professor Slughorn were standing near the wall, talking. They both looked up as the group approached.

“Hi, Harry!” Neville said, grinning and coming forward to meet him. “Thanks for inviting me and Horace along for this. I’ve been curious about it ever since the Americans got here.”

“Harry Potter, as I live and breathe.” Slughorn said warmly, taking Harry’s hand in both of his. “Very good of you indeed to ask us to come. You know I’m always interested in new developments in the international magical community.”

Harry led the group to a gate in the stone wall. It opened onto a neat flagstone path that meandered toward the lake. “Don’t thank me, either of you. I only brought the both of you along so that you could ask all the smart questions and make sense of what they show us.”

Slughorn laughed indulgently, but Neville only smiled. James figured that his dad was probably telling at least part of the truth, and only Neville knew it.

The group approached a large canvas tent that was pitched on a low rise overlooking the water. An American flag hung limp on one of the tent’s poles, over a flag emblazoned with the Alma Aleron crest. A pair of American students stood talking nearby. One of the students saw the group and acknowledged them with a slight nod. He called toward the tent. “Professor Franklyn?”

After a moment, Franklyn emerged from the side of the tent, wiping his hands on a large cloth. “Ah! Greetings, visitors.” he said graciously. “Thank you so much for coming.”

Harry shook Franklyn’s outstretched hand. It was apparent that they had already met earlier and arranged this gathering. Harry turned and made introductions all around, finishing with James.

“Of course, of course.” Franklyn said, beaming at James. “Young Mr. Potter is in my class. How are you today, James?”

“Good, sir.” James answered, smiling.

“As you should be, on such a fine day.” Franklyn said seriously, nodding approvingly. “And now that the pleasantries have been seen to, do follow me, my friends. Harry, you were interested in seeing the means by which we care for our vehicles, is that right?”

“Very much so,” Harry said. “I wasn’t here to see your arrival, of course, but I heard all about your interesting flying vehicles. I am very eager to see them, as well as your storage facility. I have heard quite a lot of speculation about it, although I admit I understand very little of it.”

“Our Trans-Dimensional Garage, yes. Virtually none of us understands very much about it, I am afraid.” Franklyn said dubiously. “In fact, if it were not for our Technomancy expert, Theodore Jackson, none of us would have the slightest idea how to maintain it. Speaking of whom, he sends his apologies for

not being able to be here for the tour. He will be joining us this evening and will be happy to discuss it with you then, should you have any questions for him.”

“As I’m sure we will,” Titus Hardcastle said in his low, gravelly voice.

James followed his dad around to the open side of the tent and nearly tripped over his own feet when he looked inside. The tent was quite large, with complicated wooden struts and frameworks supporting it. All three of the Alma Aleron flying vehicles were parked inside it, leaving enough room for neat arrangements of tool chests, maintenance equipment, extra parts and several men in work clothes who moved among the vehicles busily. The strangest thing about the tent, however, was that the back was missing. Where James was sure he should have seen the hanging canvas wall he had seen from the outside, there was simply open air, looking out onto a view that was definitely not any view of the Hogwarts grounds. Neat, red brick buildings and huge, horny trees could be seen in the distance beyond the tent’s missing back wall. Even stranger, the lighting of the scene was completely different than the bright noon sunlight of the Hogwarts grounds. On the other side of the tent, the scene was lit with a pale pink light, the huge fluffy clouds in the distance tinged with gold. The trees and grass seemed to sparkle, as if covered in morning dew. One of the workmen nodded at Franklyn, then turned and walked out into the strange scene, brushing his hands on his overalls.

“Welcome to one of the worlds few Trans-Dimensional structures,” Franklyn said, gesturing proudly. “Our Garage, which simultaneously stands both here, in temporary residence on the grounds of Hogwarts castle, and in its permanent location in the east quadrangle of Alma Aleron University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States.”

“Great Ghost of Golgamethe,” Slughorn said, stepping forward slowly. “I’ve read of such things but never thought I’d live to see one. Is this a naturally occurring temporal anomaly? Or is this orchestrated via quantum transference charms?”

“*That’s* why I invited you, Professor.” Harry said, smiling and examining the interior of the tent.

“The former,” Franklyn said, stepping between the Dodge Hornet and the Volkswagen Beetle to make room for the group. “This is one of only three known dimensional plurality bubbles. What that means, I am told, is that this tent exists within a dimensional bridge, allowing it to span two places simultaneously. Thus, we can see on one side the noontime grounds of Hogwarts,” he gestured out the open side of the tent through which they had entered. “What you might think of as *our* side of the trans-dimensional bubble. And on the other side,” he spread a hand toward the dim landscape seen magically through the rear of the tent, “the dawn-time quadrangle of Alma Aleron University, the other side of the bubble. Meet Mr. Peter Graham, our head mechanic.”

A man straightened up from the open hood of the Stutz Dragonfly. He smiled and waved. “Good to meet you lady and gentlemen. So to speak.”

“Likewise,” Neville, who was closest, said a bit faintly.

“Mr. Graham and his men are all in the American half of the bubble,” Franklyn explained. “Seeing as they are specifically trained to work on our fleet, we find it best to let them handle the care and maintenance even while we travel. As you may guess, however, they are not, technically, here.” To illustrate, Franklyn reached toward one of the workmen who was squatted near the Hornet. Franklyn’s hand swept through the man as if he were smoke. The man seemed not to have noticed.

“So,” Harry said, frowning slightly. “They can hear us, and see us, and we can see and hear them as well, but they are still there, in America, and we are still here, at Hogwarts. Therefore we cannot touch them?”

“Precisely,” Franklyn said.

James spoke up. “Then how is it we can touch the cars, and so can your mechanics in the States?”

“Excellent question, my boy,” Slughorn said, patting James on the back.

“It is indeed,” Franklyn agreed. “And that is where things get a bit, er, quantum. The simple answer is that these cars, unlike us, are multi-dimensional. You’ve all heard, I expect, the theory that there are more dimensions beyond the four we are familiar with, yes?”

There were nods. James hadn’t heard of any such theory, but he thought he understood the idea nonetheless.

Franklyn went on. “The theory states that there are extra dimensions, unknowable by any of our senses, but just as real. Effectively, Professor Jackson has created a spell that enables these vehicles to tap into those dimensions, allowing them to exist simultaneously in two places anytime they are inside the walls of this Garage. While they are parked here, they cross the dimensional bubble and exist in both places at once.”

“Remarkable,” Slughorn said, running his hand along the fender of the Hornet. “So, effectively, your crew can service the vehicles regardless of where they travel, and you are afforded a view of home, even if you cannot access it.”

“Very true.” agreed Franklyn. “It is indeed both a great convenience and a touch of comfort.”

Neville was interested in the cars themselves. “Are they actual mechanized creatures, or are they charmed machines?”

James lost interest as Franklyn launched into a detailed explanation of the winged cars. Walking over to the other side of the tent, he looked out into the grounds of the American school. The sun had just peeked over the roof of the red brick building nearby, casting its rose colored light onto a clock tower. It was just after six in the morning there. How utterly strange and wonderful, James thought. Tentatively, he reached out his hand, curious to see if he could feel the coolness of the morning air in that other place. He felt a strange, numbing feeling in his fingertips, and then they brushed unseen canvas. Sure enough, he couldn’t pass through, or even feel the air of the place.

“Too bad you can’t come on over, friend,” a voice said. James looked up. The head mechanic was leaning against the fender of the Beetle, smiling. “It’s almost breakfast and today’s mushroom omelet day.”

James grinned. “Sounds good. It’s lunchtime, here.”

“Professor Franklyn,” James heard Mr. Recreant’s voice say rather loudly. “How does this, er, structure comply with the International Magical Coalition’s ban on unproven or dark magic? Being virtually one of a kind, it would seem difficult to establish much of a safety record.”

“Ah, too true.” Franklyn agreed, looking steadily at Mr. Recreant. “We have been fortunate enough not to have experienced any problems so far, thus we have gone more or less unnoticed by the Coalition. In any case, it would be difficult to prove the threat of any danger. Even a total failure of Professor Jackson’s Trans-Dimensional spell-work would mean, at worst, that we’d have to take a taxi home instead of our beloved cars.”

“Excuse me,” Miss Sacarhina interjected, affecting a rather plastic smile. “A what?”

“I’m sorry, Miss,” Franklyn said. “A cab. A rented Muggle vehicle. I was being somewhat ridiculous, of course.”

Sacarhina cinched her smile a notch tighter. “Ah. Yes, of course. I tend to forget the American wizard’s fascination with Muggle machinery. I cannot imagine how it slipped my notice.”

Franklyn seemed oblivious to her sarcasm. “Well, I won’t speak for my compatriots, but I admit I do enjoy tinkering. Part of my appreciation for the Garage is that it allows me to oversee the maintenance of my fleet. I never get tired of figuring out how things work, and trying to make them work just a little bit better.”

“Mm-hmm.” Sacarhina nodded primly, glancing around at the cars.

One of the mechanics touched a wire under the hood of the Stutz Dragonfly and there was a spurt of blue sparks. With a squeak and a jerk, the long wings of the car unfolded, beating the air several times before screeching to a halt again. Neville had had to duck backward to avoid being pummeled by them.

“Good reflexes, Neville,” Harry said. “That was almost a case of ‘fly swats man’.”

Neville glanced at Harry and saw the suppressed smile. Hardcastle cleared his throat. “We should be moving along, ma’am, gentlemen.”

“Of course,” Harry agreed. “Mr. Franklyn,”

Franklyn raised a hand. “I insist you call me Ben. I’m three hundred years old, give or take, and being called Mister just reminds me of that. Will you indulge me?”

Harry grinned. “Of course, Ben. I look forward to seeing you at dinner tonight. Thank you very much for showing us your remarkable Garage.”

“A pleasure,” Franklyn said, beaming proudly. “I’ve got a very interesting thought-powered printing press back home I’d love to show you when you come to visit us in the States. I’d even show you the bell I helped cast back during the birth of our country, but the blasted thing’s broken and they won’t let me fix it.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Graham, the mechanic, called after them. “Or he’ll have you believing he forged the copper for the Statue of Liberty.” There was laughter from the rest of the crew.

Franklyn grimaced, and then waved Harry and the group on. “Tonight, my friends. Bring your appetite. And perhaps a competent freezing charm. I understand that Madame Delacroix is overseeing the gumbo.”