



15. THE MUGGLE SPY

Martin J. Prescott was a Reporter. He always thought of the word as if it was capitalized. For Martin, being a Reporter was more than a job. It was his identity. He wasn't just another face reading from a teleprompter, or another name next to a dateline. He was what the producers in the age of the twenty-four hour news cycle called "a personality". He accented the news. He framed it. He colored it. Not in any negative way, or so he firmly believed. He simply added that subtle dash of flair that made news into *News*, in other words, something people might want to watch or read. For one thing, Martin J. Prescott had the look. He wore white button-down shirts with jeans, and he usually had his shirt sleeves rolled up a bit. If he wore a tie, it was invariably of an impeccable style, but loosened just a tad; enough to say *yes, I've been working extremely hard, but I respect my viewers enough to maintain a degree of professionalism*. Martin was thin, youngish, with sharp, handsome features and very dark hair that always looked windblown and fabulous. But, as Martin was proud of saying to the attendees at the occasional Press Club breakfast, his appearance wasn't what made him a Reporter. It was his sense of people, and of news. He knew how to plug the one into the other in a way that produced the biggest emotional jolt.

But the last thing that made Martin J. Prescott a Reporter was that he loved the story. Where the other high-paid and high-profile news faces had long since assembled a team of lackeys to tramp far and wide, collecting footage and filming interviews while they themselves huddled in their dressing rooms reading about their ratings, Martin prided himself in doing all his own travel and research. The truth of it was that Martin enjoyed the reporting, but what he absolutely loved was the chase. Being a member of the press was like being a hunter, except that the former aimed with a camera rather than a gun. Martin liked to stalk his prey himself. He delighted in the pursuit, in the blurry jostle of hand-held camera footage, the shouted, perfectly-timed question, the long stakeout of a courtroom back door or a suspicious hotel room. Martin did it all himself, often alone, often filming himself in the act, providing his viewers breathless moments of high tension and confrontation. No one else did it like him, and this had made him famous.

Martin had, as they say of the very best Reporters, a nose for news. His nose told him that the story he was chasing right now, if it panned out, if he could simply provide the real, unadulterated footage, was quite possibly the story of a lifetime. Even now, crouched among the brush and weeds, dirty and salty with two days' worth of sweat, his fabulous hair matted and soiled with twigs and leaves, even after all the setbacks and failures, he still felt this was the story that would cement his career. In fact, the harder he'd had to work for it, the more doggedly he'd pursued it. Even after the ghost. Even after being kicked out of a third story window by a homicidal kid. Even after his harrowing brush with the gigantic spider. Martin viewed setbacks as proof of value. The harder it was, the more it was worth pursuing. He took a grim satisfaction in knowing that, had he merely hired a team of investigators to check this out, they'd have turned back months ago, when they'd first met the strange, magical resistance of the place, without a solitary blip of a story. This was the kind of story that could only be told by him. This, he told himself with satisfaction, was anchorman material. No more field reports. No more special interest segments. If this panned out, Martin J. Prescott would be able to pave his own way in any major newsroom in the country. But why stop there? With this under his belt, he could anchor anywhere in the world, couldn't he?

But no, he told himself. One mustn't think of such things now. He had a job to do. A difficult and outrageously demanding job, but Martin took pleasure in the sense that the hardest part was behind him. After months of plotting and arranging, planning and observing, the time had finally come for the big payoff, for all the bets to be called in. Granted, if this last phase of the hunt didn't work out exactly as planned, he'd walk away with nothing. He'd been unable to get any usable, convincing footage on his own, except for the hand-held camera video of that incredible flying contest a few months back. That might have been enough, but even that had been lost, sacrificed – reluctantly! – to the gigantic spider during his escape through the woods. It didn't do to dwell on failures, though. No, this would work. It would go exactly as planned. It had to. He was Martin J. Prescott.

Still crouched at the perimeter of the forest, Martin checked the connections of his cell phone. Most of his field gear had gone completely buggy ever since he made it through the forest. His Palmtop barely worked at all, and when it did, it exhibited some very strange behaviour. The night before last, he'd been trying to use it to access his office computer when the screen suddenly went entirely pink and began to display the lyrics to a rather rude song about hedgehogs. Fortunately, his camera and cell phone had worked

relatively well until the incident with the spider. His phone was nearly all he had left now, and despite the fact that the display screen showed a strange mixture of numbers, exclamation marks and hieroglyphics, it did seem to be maintaining a connection. Satisfied, Martin spoke.

“I’m huddled outside the castle at this moment, hidden in the arms of the forest that has been my occasional home during these last grueling months. Up until now, I have simply watched, careful not to disturb what might only be a simple country school or a boarding facility, despite the reports of my sources. Still, I am confident that the time has finally come for me to approach. If my sources are wrong, I will merely be met with puzzlement and that rare brand of careful good humor that is the purview of the Scottish countryside. If, however, my sources prove correct, as I suspect, based on my inexplicable experiences so far, then I may well be walking into the clutches of my own doom. I am now standing. It is mid morning, about nine o’clock, but I see no sign of anyone. I am leaving the safety of my hiding place. I am entering the grounds.”

Martin crept carefully around the edge of the ramshackle cabin near the forest. The enormous, shaggy man he’d often spied in and around the cabin was not anywhere in sight. Martin straightened, determining to be bold about his initial approach. He began to cross the neatly cropped field between the cabin and the castle. In truth, he did not believe he was in grave peril. He had an innate sense that the greatest dangers were behind him, in that creepy and mysterious forest. He had indeed camped on the fringes of that forest, far on the side opposite the castle, where the trees seemed rather more normal and there were fewer unsettling noises in the night. Still, his travels back and forth through the densest parts of that forest had been strange, to say the least. Apart from the spider, which he had only escaped by sheer good luck, he hadn’t actually seen anything. In a sense, he thought it might have been better if he had. A known monstrosity, like the spider, is far easier to deal with than the unknown phantoms conjured by Martin’s imagination in response to the strange noises he’d heard on those long woodland walks. He’d been shadowed, he knew. Large things, heavy things, had followed him, always off to the left or right, hidden just behind the density of the trees. He knew they were watching him, and he also sensed that, unlike the spider, they were intelligent. They might have been hostile, but they were certainly curious. Martin had almost dared to call out to them, to demand they reveal themselves. Finally, remembering the spider, he’d decided that, after all, maybe an unseen monster that is merely curious is better than a seen monster that feels provoked.

“The castle, as I have mentioned, is positively huge,” Martin said into the small microphone clipped to his lapel. The microphone was connected to the phone on his belt. “I’ve travelled much of this continent and seen quite a variety of castles, but I’ve never seen anything so simultaneously ancient and yet immaculately maintained. The windows, apart from the one I was forced through those months ago, are beautifully sturdy and colorful. The stonework here doesn’t show so much as a crack...” This wasn’t entirely true, but it was true enough. “It is a beautiful spring day, fortunately. Clear and relatively warm. I am not hiding myself at all as I cross to the enormous gates, which are open. There... there seems to be a gathering over to my right, on a sort of field. I... I can’t quite tell, but it looks as if they are playing football. I can’t say that I expected that. They don’t seem to be paying me any attention. I am continuing to the gates.”

As Martin entered the gates, he finally began to be noticed. He slowed, still maintaining a steady course onward. His goal was simply to get as far into the castle as possible. He had purposely left his still camera behind. Cameras, in nearly every circumstance, incite resistance. People with cameras get thrown out of places. Someone simply walking into a place, walking confidently and purposely, may be met with curiosity, but they are not usually stopped. At least, not until it is too late. The courtyard was dotted with young people moving here and there in knots. They wore black robes over white shirts and ties. Many carried backpacks or books. The ones nearest Martin turned to watch him past, mostly out of curiosity.

“There are ... there are what appear for all the world to be... school pupils,” Martin said quietly into his microphone, sidling past students as he worked across the courtyard. “Young people in robes, all school age. They seem surprised at my presence, but not hostile. In fact, as I am now approaching the entryway into the castle proper, it appears that I have elicited the attention of virtually everyone. Excuse me,”

This last was said to Ted Lupin, who had just appeared in the doorway with Noah Metzker and Sabrina Hildegard. All three of them stopped talking instantly as the strange man in the white shirt and loosened tie slipped between them. The quill in Sabrina’s hair wobbled as she turned to watch him.

“Who’s he talking to?” Ted said.

“And who the ruddy hell is he?” Sabrina added. The trio turned in the open doorway, watching the man work his way carefully into the entry hall. Students parted for him, recognizing immediately that this man was rather out of place. Still, no one seemed particularly alarmed. There were even a few puzzled grins.

Martin went on speaking into his microphone. “More and more of what I must, for the time being, call students. There are dozens of them around me at the moment. I am moving through a sort of main hall. There are... chandeliers, great doorways. Statues. Paintings. The paintings... the paintings... the paintings...” For the first time, Martin seemed at a loss for words. He forgot the students gathering around him, watching him, as he took two steps toward one of the larger paintings lining the entry hall. In the painting, a group of ancient wizards were clustered around a large crystal ball, their white beards illuminated in its glow. One of the wizards noticed the staring man in the white shirt and tie. He straightened and scowled. “You’re out of uniform, young man,” the wizard exclaimed sternly. “You look a fright. I daresay you have a leaf in your hair.”

“The paintings... the paintings are...” Martin said, his voice an octave higher than normal. He coughed and gathered himself. “The paintings are moving. They are ... for lack of a better term, like painted movies, but alive. They are... addressing me.”

“I address equals, young man,” the wizard said. “I *command* the likes of you. Begone, ruffian.”

There was a smattering of laughter from the crowding students, but there was also a growing sense of nervousness. Nobody was ever amazed at the moving paintings. This man was either a nutter or a wizard, or he was... well, it was unthinkable. A Muggle could not get into Hogwarts. The students formed a large circle around him, as if he was a mildly dangerous animal.

“The students have hemmed me in,” Martin said, turning around, his eyes rather wild. “I’m going to attempt to break through, however. I must move further in.”

As Martin proceeded, the perimeter of students broke apart easily, following him. There was a murmuring now. Nervous chatter followed the man, and he began to raise his voice.

“I’m entering a large chamber. Quite high. I’ve been here before, but late at night, in the dark. Yes, this is the hall of moving staircases. Very treacherous. Remarkable mechanics at work here, and yet no sound of machinery at all.”

“What’s he saying about machinery?” someone in the crowding students called. “Who is this bloke anyway? What’s he doing here?” There was a chorus of confused responses.

Martin pushed on, turning past the staircases, almost shouting now. “My presence is beginning to cause some resistance. I may be stopped at any moment. I... I am bypassing the stairs.”

Martin turned a corner and found himself in the midst of a group of students playing winks and augers in a bright alcove. He stopped suddenly and recoiled as the auger, an old quaffle, stopped three inches from his face, floating and turning slowly.

“Oi, what’re you thinking just walking right into the middle of the sodding match, you?” one of the players called, yanking his wand up and retrieving the quaffle. “Dangerous, that is. You need to watch yourself.”

“Flying... things!” Martin squeaked, straightening himself and smoothing his shirt frantically. “I... wands. Actual magical wands and levitating objects! This is perfectly remarkable! I’ve never seen...!”

“Hey now,” another of the winks and augers players said sharply. “Who is this? What’s he going on about?”

Someone else yelled, “Who let him in? He’s a Muggle! Got to be!”

“It’s the man from the Quidditch pitch! The intruder!”

The crowd began to yell and jostle. Martin ducked past the winks and augers players, losing some of the pursuing crowd. “I’m pressing in further still. Corridors leading everywhere. Here is... er, as far as I can tell, it is a hall of classrooms. I’m entering the first one...”

He burst into the first classroom on his right, followed by a stream of confused, yelling students. The room was long and recessed. The students attending the class turned in their seats, seeking the source of the interruption.

“Relatively normal, it seems, on the surface, at least,” Martin yelled over the growing din, scanning the room. “Students, textbooks, a teacher of some kind, who... who, who, whooo...”

Again, Martin's voice rose and he seemed to be losing control of it. His eyes boggled and he ran out of breath. His mouth continued to work, making hoarse raspy sounds. At the front of the class, the ghostly Professor Binns, whose grasp on the temporal realm was tentative at best, had not yet noticed the interruption. He droned on, his voice high and chiming, like wind in a bottle. The professor finally noticed the gasping form of Martin J. Prescott and stopped, frowning. "Who is this individual, might I ask?" Binns said, peering over his ghostly spectacles.

Martin finally dragged a great gulp of air. "A ghooooosst!" he declared tremulously, pointing at Binns. He began to totter. Just as the students near the doorway were shoved roughly aside by the advancing figures of Professor Longbottom and Headmistress McGonagall, flanked by Ted and Sabrina, Martin fell over in a dead faint. He landed hard across two desks at the rear of the room. The students occupying the desks threw their hands up, lunging to get out of the way. A bottle of ink fell to the floor and shattered.

Headmistress McGonagall approached the man swiftly and stopped a few feet away. "Can anyone please inform me who this man is," she said in a strident voice, "and what he is doing fainting dead away in my school?"

James Potter shouldered his way to the front of the crowd. He looked at the man collapsed across the desks. He sighed deeply and said, "I think I can, ma'am."



Fifteen minutes later, James, McGonagall, Neville Longbottom and Benjamin Franklyn bustled into the headmistress' office, with Martin Prescott stumbling between them. Martin had regained consciousness

halfway to the office, and had instantly shrieked in horror at the realization that he was being levitated along the corridor by Neville. Neville, in turn, had been so startled by Martin's shriek that he'd nearly dropped him, but had recovered in time to lower the man fairly gently to the floor. Apart from James' explanation that the intruder was the very same man he'd accidentally knocked through the stained glass window and later seen on the Quidditch pitch, the trip to the headmistress office had progressed with very little conversation. Once the door to her office had closed behind them, McGonagall spoke up.

"I only want to know who you are, why you are here, and most importantly, how you managed to gain entry," she said furiously, stalking behind her desk but remaining upright. "Once we have resolved that, you will be removed forthwith, and with nary a glimmer of any memory of what you have seen, I can promise you that. Now speak."

Martin swallowed and glanced around at the assembly. He saw James and grimaced, remembering the shattering glass and the sickly fall afterward. He took a deep breath. "First of all, my name is Martin J. Prescott. I work for a news program called *Inside View*. And second of all," he said, returning his gaze to the headmistress, "I have been injured upon these grounds. I don't wish to make a legal matter of it, but you must be aware that it is entirely within my rights to pursue compensation for those injuries. And somehow I don't get the impression that this domicile is *insured*, exactly."

"How dare you?" McGonagall exclaimed, leaning over her desk and meeting Martin's eyes. "You break into this castle, trespass where you have neither the right nor the understanding to carry yourself..." She shook her head, and then went on in a lower voice. "I will not be baited by threats. You are obviously of Muggle origin, so I will practice a modicum of patience with you. Answer my questions willingly, or I will be more than happy to resort to more straightforward means of interrogation."

"Ah," Martin said, trying to sound confident despite the fact that he was trembling visibly. "You must mean something along the lines of this," He reached into his shirt pocket and produced a small vial. James recognized it as the one he had seen in this man's hand when he'd encountered him in the Potions closet. "Yes. I see by your faces that you know what this is. Took me a time to figure it out. *Veritaserum*, indeed. I put two drops into a coworker's tea and I couldn't get him to shut up for an hour. I learned things about him I hope I live to forget, I'll tell you."

"You tested an unknown potion on an unsuspecting person?" Franklyn interrupted.

"Well, I had to know what it did, didn't I? I figured two drops wouldn't hurt anyone." He shrugged and lifted the bottle again, looking at the light through it. "Truth serum. If it was dangerous, you'd hardly have kept it right there on the shelf where just anyone could get to it."

McGonagall's face was white with fury. "In these halls, we rely on discipline and respect rather than cages and keys. Your friend is fortunate indeed that you didn't happen upon a vial of narglespike or tharff sap."

“Don’t try to intimidate me,” Martin said, obviously quite intimidated in spite of himself. “I just wanted to show you that I know your tricks. I’ve been watching and studying you for quite some time. You won’t be getting me to drink any of your potions, or performing any brainwashing tricks on me. I’ll answer your questions, but only because I expect you to answer some of mine, as well.”

Neville fingered his wand. “And why, pray tell, do you believe we won’t just bring in an obliviator, have your mind wiped of all memory of this place, and drop you off at the nearest turnpike?”

Martin tapped the tiny microphone clipped to his lapel. “This is why. My voice, and everything all of you are saying, is being sent through my phone to a computer at my office. Everything is being recorded. In a small town not three kilometers from here is a film crew and a group of experts in a variety of fields whom I have asked to assist me in my investigation-”

“Investigation!” the headmistress repeated incredulously. “Absolutely and unequivocally out of the question!”

Martin overrode her. “One of those individuals is an agent of the British special police.”

James felt a palpable silence descend over the room at the mention of the Muggle police. He knew from conversations he’d heard between his dad and other Ministry officials that it was one thing to oblivate a single person, or even a contained group, but things could get extremely complicated if any official Muggle investigative bureaus became involved.

“It pays to be owed favors in high places,” Martin went on. “It took quite a lot to get a ranking agent out here, but I am confident that this is the sort of story one calls in large favors for. There is no official charge yet, of course. Merely curiosity, since there is no record of any establishment of this size in the area. The point is this: if they do not receive a phone call from me in the next two hours with directions for how to get their gear onto the grounds, they are to return immediately to the office, retrieve the recording of this conversation and everything that has occurred to me here so far, and broadcast it however they see fit. It may seem preposterous to most people, I grant. A school in a castle in the dead of nowhere teaching kids how to work real magic, wands and all. But your secret will be out, nevertheless. Your students may attend here, in this secret location, but they do sometimes go home, do they not? And I am willing to bet those homes are nowhere near as protected as this. There will be investigations. You will be revealed. One way or another.”

Headmistress McGonagall’s face was as hard and white as a tombstone. She merely stared at the skinny man in the white shirt. Franklyn broke the silence.

“My good sir, you cannot comprehend what you are asking.” He took off his glasses and stepped in front of Martin. “Your plan would undeniably result in the closing down of this school and possibly many others like it. All those present, and many, many more, would lose their livelihoods and educations. More importantly, what you are insisting upon is the re-introduction of the entire magical world into the world of Muggles, whether either are prepared for that or not. And to what end? Not for the betterment of mankind, I expect. No, I suspect that your aspirations are far more... myopic. Please, do think before you continue.

There are forces at work here that you do not comprehend, although you may well be acting on behalf of some of them. I sense that you are not a bad man, or at least not yet a *very* bad man. Think, my friend, before you make a choice that will condemn you in the eyes of generations.”

Martin listened to Franklyn’s words, and seemed to actually consider them. Then, as if snapping out of a daze, he said, “You’re Benjamin Franklin, aren’t you?” He grinned and waggled a finger at Franklyn. “I knew you looked familiar! That’s amazing. Look, I know you’re not in a position to discuss this right now, but I have two words for you: exclusive... interview. Think about it, right?”

“Mr. Prescott,” the headmistress said, her voice stony. “You cannot expect us to make a decision regarding this in a matter of minutes. We simply must discuss this.”

“Indeed,” Neville added. “Even if we do agree to your conditions, you must conduct yourself upon our terms. How that can be of any benefit to us considering the sheer magnitude of what you are undertaking I do not yet know. But regardless, we must have some time.”

“As I said,” Martin replied, seeming far more comfortable now that he believed he had the upper hand, “you have two hours. Well, ninety-four minutes, actually.”

“Answer me this, Mr. Prescott,” Franklyn said, sighing. “How did you get onto the school grounds? Before we go any further with this charade, we must know that.”

Martin sighed lightly. “Got a chair? It’s rather a story.”

Neville pointedly produced his wand. Never taking his eyes off Martin, he pointed the wand at a wooden chair in the corner and levitated it rather brusquely. The chair shot forward, nearly scooping Martin off his feet. The man plopped gracelessly onto the seat and the chair thunked to the floor.

“Do continue.” Neville said, half sitting on a corner of the headmistress’ desk. McGonagall settled into her chair but remained ramrod straight. Franklyn and James continued to stand.

“Well, I first got the letter telling me about this place in September of last year,” Martin said, leaning forward and rubbing his backside while staring angrily at Neville. “The *View* offers a hundred thousand euro reward for proof of paranormal activity, and the gentleman that wrote the letter seemed to think that this Hogwarts place would offer such proof in spades. Honestly, we get thousands of letters a year from people hoping to collect the reward. They include everything from blurry pictures of tossed pie plates to actual slices of toast with the faces of saints burned onto them. The *View* never actually had any plans to reward the money. They like a nice dash of the inexplicable in the news from time to time, but when it comes to belief, most of them are the most cynical bunch of hardheads imaginable.

“Me, on the other hand, I’m the sort of guy who wants to believe. It wasn’t the tone of the letter that got my attention, though. It was the little item the sender had included in the envelope. A little box containing something called a chocolate frog. I expected it might have some novelty spring-snakes in it, at best, so being a sport, I went ahead and opened it. Sure enough, there was a perfect little chocolate frog

inside. I was just about to grab it and take a bite when the thing lifted its head and looked right at me. I just about dropped the box. Next thing I know, the frog leaps straight out of the box and onto my desk. It was a hot day, and the thing had just come in with the post. Good thing, too, cause the little bugger had gotten a little melty. Left little chocolatey frog footprints all over that night's copy. Three good hops, then the frog just putters out. I was afraid to touch it, but five minutes later it still hadn't moved. I had time to determine that it had just been a normal frog covered in chocolate. Some joke. Thing probably had suffocated from the stuff, and from the heat of being in the box. So I went ahead and scooped it back up and sure enough, the thing was just chocolate. Good chocolate, too, I might add.

"I still might've forgotten all about it, to tell you the truth. No matter how open-minded a person might think they are, being confronted with something truly inexplicable still tends to shut down the old belief circuits. If it weren't for those little chocolatey frog footprints on my papers, I might never have mustered the resolve to be here. I kept them in the bottom of my desk, and every time I looked at them I remembered that little bugger hopping across my desk. I couldn't get it out of my mind. So I emailed the guy who'd sent it. Nice trick, I told him. Got any more?

"He emails me back next day and says if I really want to see tricks, I just need to follow the signal he'd send me. Sure enough, the day after that there's another package from him. A little one. Contained everything I needed to lock onto the signal here. There was no way those faithless turds in management would equip me with a crew to investigate the origin of a jumping chocolate frog, even if I showed them the froggie footprints. Fortunately, I had some vacation time coming, so I decided to give it a go on my own. A little camping out would do me good. So I packed my own cameras and caught a train.

"Getting into the general vicinity was easy enough, of course. I spent the first night on the other side of the forest, knowing by the signal that I was within a few kilometers of the source. Next day, I was on foot by dawn. I followed the direction I knew I was supposed to go, but sure enough, every time, I'd find myself heading right back out the way I'd come. It never seemed like I'd turned around, or even veered off my course. It was as if I had succeeded in getting to the opposite side of the forest, but somehow the planet had turned around right underneath me. I tried using a compass, and it'd tell me I was dead-on as well, until all of a sudden I'd be stepping right back out into my camp and the needle would spin away as if it'd forgotten what it was for.

"This went on for three solid days. I was getting frustrated, I'll tell you that. But I was also getting determined, because I knew something was trying to keep me out. I wanted to know what. So the next day, I got out my little package and located the coordinates. This time, though, I kept it in front of me the whole time, watching that little flashing dot. Soon enough, the ground seemed to force me away. I'd run into an old creek bed with sides too steep to climb. I'd angle away only to run into a deadfall of trees or a low cliff. Everything seemed to be working to turn me off my course. I pushed on, though. I climbed and scurried. I pushed through thorns and the thickest undergrowth I've ever seen. Then, even gravity seemed to be working against me. I kept feeling as if the earth was tilting up beneath me, trying to throw me backwards off it. No

such thing was happening, of course, but it was a dreadful sensation nonetheless. I became nauseous and unaccountably dizzy. But I followed my direction, crawling at the last.

“And then, suddenly, the sensations were gone. The forest seemed to snap back to normal, or at least what passes for normal in this neck of the woods. I had made it through. Ten minutes later, I came out for the first time on the edge of the clearing overlooking this very castle. I was stunned, needless to say. But what amazed me far more than the castle was the scene that I very nearly walked into the midst of.

“There, not twenty feet before me, was the largest man I had ever seen. He looked almost like a grizzly bear that’d been taught to walk upright. But then, standing next to him...” For the first time in his story, Martin paused. He swallowed, obviously shaken by the very memory. “There was something so monstrously huge that I at first thought it must be a kind of dinosaur. It had four legs, each the size of a pillar. I raised my eyes and saw that it was, in fact, two creatures standing near each other, and they were both human-shaped. The tallest one’s head was above the treetops. I couldn’t even see its face. I scrambled back into a hiding place, certain they’d heard me, but it seemed not to be so. The smallest one, the one that looked like a walking bear, talked to the other two, and they answered, sort of. Their voices vibrated the ground. Then, to my horror, they turned and headed towards me, into the forest. The largest one’s foot came down right next to me, shaking the earth like a bomb and leaving a footprint three inches deep. Then they were gone.”

Martin drew a huge sigh, obviously content with his telling of the tale. “And that was when I knew I had found it. The greatest story of my life. Possibly the greatest story of this century.” He looked around as if he expected applause.

“There is one small detail you have failed to explain to my satisfaction,” Headmistress McGonagall said coldly. “This device you mentioned. It was somehow able to point you to this school. I must know what it is and how it works.”

Martin raised his eyebrows, and then chuckled and sat up. “Oh, yes. That. It’s been acting pretty wonky ever since I got here, but at least it maintained the signal. A simple GPS device. Er, please forgive me. You are probably unfamiliar with the term. A global positioning system device. It allows me to locate any point on earth within a meter or so. Very helpful bit of, er, *Muggle* magic, if you will.”

James spoke for the first time since entering the room. “But how did you pinpoint the school? How would that device know where to find it? It’s unplottable. Not on any map.”

Martin turned to look at him, his brow furrowed, apparently uncertain whether he should even deign to answer James. Finally, seeing that everyone else in the room expected him to respond, Martin stood up. “Like I said, I was sent the coordinates. They were provided by someone on the inside. Really, very simple.”

Martin reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled something out. James knew what it was even before he saw it. He had known it somehow even before he’d asked the question. His heart sank as if through the very floor.

Martin flourished a Gamedeck. It was a different color than Ralph's, but of exactly the same make. He plunked it unceremoniously onto the headmistress' desk. "Wireless uplink for online competition, including chat capability. Pretty standard stuff. So. Anybody here go by the screen name 'Austramaddux?'"



"You can't do this to me!" Martin exclaimed as Neville led him unceremoniously into the Room of Requirement, which had arranged itself into a rather quaint turret-top prison cell, complete with a barred window, a cot, a bowl of water and a crust of bread on a plate. "This is unlawful imprisonment! It's an outrage!"

"Think of it as field research," Neville instructed politely. "We have much to discuss, and after your ordeals in the forest, we thought you might like a bit of a breather. Take a load off, friend."

James, who was standing in the hall behind Neville, couldn't help smiling a little. Martin saw him, scowled angrily, and made to shove past Neville. Neville whipped out his wand so fast that James barely saw his robes twitch. "I said," Neville repeated with low emphasis, not quite pointing his wand at Martin, "take a load off. Friend."

James' smile faltered. He'd never seen Neville Longbottom so intense. Of course, James knew the stories of how Neville had cut off the head of Voldemort's snake, Nagini, but that was before James had been born. In all his memory of the man, Neville had been a kindly figure, soft-spoken and a bit clumsy. Now, Neville's wand hand was so immobile and purposeful that it might have been carved out of marble. Martin blinked at Neville, saw something in the man's posture and the set of his face that he didn't like, and backed up. The back of his knees struck the cot and he sat down hard. Neville pocketed his wand and stepped back into the hall, pulling the door of the Room of Requirement shut behind him. Martin, seeing the wand put away, immediately jumped up and started to yell again, but his voice was cut off as the door slammed shut.

"You know, we do have dungeons, Madam Headmistress," Neville said in his normal voice.

Seeing the door closed, Headmistress McGonagall turned on her heel and walked briskly down the corridor as the others followed. “We have some rather antique torture devices as well, Professor Longbottom, but I believe this will suffice for the moment. We only need to hold him until we receive word from the Ministry of Magic about whatever recourse we may or may not have against the dilemma Mr. Prescott has foisted upon us. In the meantime, Mr. Potter, I must ask you: Do you know anything about the game device that has apparently led this... *person* into our midst?”

James swallowed as he struggled to keep up the headmistress’ pace. He opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came. “Er, well...”

Neville touched James on the shoulder as they walked. “We all saw your face turn as pale as the moon when Prescott produced the GameDeck device. You looked almost like you expected it. Is there something you know that might help us, James?”

James decided there was no point in trying to protect Ralph. It wasn’t his fault, anyway. “My friend has one. He’s a first year like me, but he’s Muggle born. He didn’t know it might be dangerous to have here. None of us did, really. I was surprised it even worked here.”

“He used it to communicate with someone in the Muggle community?” Neville asked quickly.

“No! As far as I know, he never used it at all! As soon as he got here, his House mates saw it and gave him a load of trouble about it. They’re Slytherins, so they were all ragging on him about counterfeit magical devices, about how it was an insult to the purebloods and all that.”

The headmistress turned a corner, heading back toward her office. “I assume you are speaking of Mr. Deedle? Yes. I am confident enough that he is not at the head of this particular conspiracy, although this device of his might be. Does it perhaps broadcast some sort of signal?”

James shrugged. “You’d be better off asking Ralph about that, or even my other friend, Zane. He seems to know a lot about how these things work. But I don’t think it sends out information on its own. Ralph says somebody else took his GameDeck and used it. Another Slytherin, we think. Zane was able to tell that somebody had spent some time on it, and that they’d used the name Austramaddux. They hadn’t played the game at all, though. They must have just been using it to send information. Probably the coordinates that that guy said he used to locate the school using his GPS thing.”

“You’re quite sure about this, are you, James?” Neville said, following the headmistress back into her office. “Have you considered that Mr. Deedle might have used this device on school grounds and unwittingly shared information that he shouldn’t have? It is possible that this tale of the stolen GameDeck is a ruse.”

James shook his head firmly. “No way. Not Ralph. It never even occurred to him, or any of us, that the thing might be used to lead people here. He just knew it made his Slytherin mates angry.”

“We’re all forgetting one important thing,” McGonagall said, lowering herself tiredly into her chair. “Even if Mr. Deedle or this unknown borrower of the device did attempt to share information about this school with a Muggle, the vow of secrecy would prevent them.”

Professor Franklyn, who had remained in the headmistress’ office to fiddle with the GameDeck, replaced the device on the desk and stared at it, apparently unable to make anything of it. “How does this vow work, precisely, Madam Headmistress?”

“It’s quite straightforward, Professor. Every student must sign the vow proclaiming they will not knowingly reveal any information regarding the existence of Hogwarts to any Muggle individual or agency. If they do, the magical properties of the vow will engage, preventing any such communication. This might mean the Langlock curse, or any other curse that would disable the individual’s ability to share information. In this case, we might assume that the user of the device might experience a fusing of the fingers, or paralysis of the hand, anything that would prevent them from entering any dangerous information into this device.”

Franklyn was thoughtful. “We use a similar means at Alma Aleron. The wording of the vow must be very specific, of course. No loopholes. Still, it does seem apparent that someone was indeed able to use such a device to communicate very specific information about this school. My guess is that each of these gaming devices is equipped with a tracker that corresponds to the global positioning mechanism Mr. Prescott spoke of. Whoever used Mr. Deedle’s device was apparently able to send the geographical coordinates of one GameDeck to another. Mr. Prescott merely needed to enter that information into his GPS device and follow it very carefully. Despite Mr. Prescott’s obvious Muggle nature, this made him a sort of haphazard secret keeper. He can, if he so wishes, share the secret of this school’s location with anyone else he wishes. Whether they are able to get past the school’s unplottability zone is another question, though. Not everyone is quite as persistent as he is. This might explain why he needs our help to bring in his entourage.”

“We cannot allow such a thing to happen, of course.” Neville said, looking to the headmistress.

“I’m not entirely certain we can prevent it,” she said heavily. “Our Mr. Prescott is indeed an extremely tenacious individual. He knows enough already to do us great harm. Even if we were to discover the whereabouts of his crew, oblivate them all and send them back, they would discover the recording that has been made of all Mr. Prescott has seen so far. He would inevitably return, and perhaps next time it will occur to him to bring live cameras rather than just a telephone. I see no recourse but to allow him to go on with this investigation of his, and hope to talk him out of broadcasting it.”

Neville shook his head. “I have more confidence that we could talk the merpeople out of living in the lake than that we could convince this sodding twit not to broadcast his prize story.”

Franklyn adjusted his tiny glasses and looked at the ceiling. “Of course, there are more, er, *wholesale* methods of dealing with this kind of thing, Madam Headmistress. We could simply place the imperious curse upon Mr. Prescott. That way we could arrange for him to send his crew away and even accompany him back to his offices to help him destroy any record of this visit. Once that was accomplished, we could feel free to oblivate Mr. Prescott with no fear of a repeat performance.”

McGonagall sighed. "This is not the sort of decision we are exactly authorized to make, and frankly I am glad of that. The Ministry of Magic has been notified of the situation and I am assured they will instruct us on the proper course within the hour. I expect to hear from your father directly, Mr. Potter, and at any moment."

As if on cue, a woman's voice spoke up from the fireplace. "Greetings and salutations. This is an official communication of the Ministry of Magic. Can we be assured that this is a secure assembly?"

McGonagall stood and moved around her desk to face the fireplace. "It is. These with me are the only persons on the grounds at present fully aware of what is happening, although by this point the whole of the school must know that we have a Muggle individual among us. His entry was hardly subtle."

The face in the banked coals of the Headmistress' fireplace looked around at Neville, James and Professor Franklyn. "I am the undersecretary of Miss Brenda Sacarhina, co-chair of the Council of Ambassadorial Relations. Please stand by to be connected." The face vanished.

James saw McGonagall's face tighten just the tiniest bit when the undersecretary mentioned Miss Sacarhina. Only a few seconds passed before the face of the prim woman appeared in the fireplace. "Madam McGonagall, Professors Franklyn and Longbottom, greetings. And young Mr. Potter, of course." An ingratiating smile appeared on Sacarhina's lips when she spoke to James. The smile disappeared almost as suddenly as it had appeared, as if it was something she could turn on and off like a light. "We have conferred about the situation that has thrust itself upon you and have reached a conclusion. As you may guess, we have prepared contingencies for just such an occurrence. Please tell Mr. Prescott that he may contact his associates. We find that there is no recourse but to allow his investigation to proceed, however no one other than Mr. Prescott is to be allowed onto Hogwarts grounds until a delegation from the Ministry arrives to oversee them. We will arrive no later than tomorrow evening, at which time we will assume all negotiations with Mr. Prescott and his crew."

"Miss Sacarhina," McGonagall said, "are you suggesting that the Ministry may well allow this man to perform his investigation and broadcast it to the Muggle world?"

"I'm sorry, Madam McGonagall," Sacarhina said sweetly, "I didn't mean to imply that, or anything else. You may rest assured that we are prepared to deal with this situation, regardless of the method we choose. I'd hate to burden you with any more detail than you've already been forced to deal with."

The headmistress' face became rather pink. "Burden away, Miss Sacarhina, for I can promise you that the future of this school and its students is hardly the sort of detail I'm likely to dismiss."

Sacarhina laughed lightly. "My dear Minerva, I suspect that the future of Hogwarts, the students and yourself is as secure as ever. As I mentioned, we have contingencies for such events. The Ministry is prepared."

“Forgive me, Miss Sacarhina,” Franklyn interjected, taking half a step forward, “but you’d have us believe that the Ministry of Magic has prepared contingencies for a Muggle investigative reporter penetrating the school of Hogwarts on foot with a camera crew at the ready and intentions to broadcast the secrets of the magical world to Muggles worldwide?”

Sacarhina’s indulgent smile tightened. “I’d have you believe, Mr. Franklyn, that the Ministry has prepared emergency response techniques for dealing with a wide variety of confrontations. The specifics do not matter.”

“I beg to disagree, Miss. The specifics of this instance have revealed a rather large security breach that could, at this point, be utilized by virtually anyone. This school can no longer be considered secure until this breach has been addressed.”

“One thing at a time, Professor. We appreciate your concern, but I assure you that we are fully equipped to deal with the matter in its entirety. If, however, you feel that the safety of yourself and your staff are at risk, we could possibly arrange for your early departure. This would cause us great disappointment and be quite a disruption to the school...”

“My concern, Miss Sacarhina,” Franklyn said coolly, removing his glasses, “is for the security of everyone within these walls, and for the security of the magical and Muggle worlds in general.”

“Again with the hyperbole,” Sacarhina smiled. “Please, all of you, put your minds at ease. I, along with Mr. Recreant, will arrive tomorrow evening. We will meet with this Mr. Prescott and I am quite confident—positive, even—that we will reach a mutually amicable arrangement. You needn’t bother yourselves with it any further.”

“What about my dad?” James asked.

Sacarhina blinked, apparently mystified. “Your father, James? Whatever do you mean?”

“Well, don’t you think he ought to be here along with you and Mr. Recreant?”

Sacarhina smiled her ingratiating smile again. “Why, your father is head of the Department of Aurors, James. There is no dark magic involved in this unfortunate set of circumstances, so far as we can tell. There’d be no reason to bother him with it.”

“But he’s dealt with this man before,” Neville said. “He and James witnessed him on the Quidditch pitch last year and led the search to try to capture him.”

“And a fine job he did,” Sacarhina said, her smile snapping shut. “That was his duty at the time. This, however, as you cannot fail to realize, is an ambassadorial issue. Harry Potter’s skills may be varied, but ambassadorship is not one of them. Besides, Mr. Potter is currently on assignment and not to be interrupted. We do have, however, specialists in exactly this sort of negotiation. Along with myself and Mr. Recreant, we are arranging for another ambassador to join us. He is an expert in Muggle-magical relations. We expect him

to spearhead our dealings with Mr. Prescott and his crew, and we have full confidence that he will serve all parties quite well.”

McGonagall waved her hand dismissively. “What shall we do with Mr. Prescott until your arrival, Miss Sacarhina?”

“Make him comfortable. Allow him to make his telephone call. Other than that, as little as possible.”

“Surely you do not mean for us to allow him free access to the school,” the headmistress said, as if it were a statement rather than a question.

Sacarhina seemed to shrug in the fireplace. “Whatever harm he might be able to do by observing is surely less than the harm he could do if he brought Muggle legal charges against us. We must, for the moment, treat him as a guest. Besides, it sounds as if he’s seen quite a lot already.”

McGonagall’s face was unreadable. “Very well, then. Good afternoon, Miss Sacarhina. We will look forward to your arrival tomorrow evening.”

Sacarhina smiled again. “Indeed. Until then.”

The face vanished from the fire. The headmistress reached for her poker and poked studiously at the embers for several seconds, strewing them so that no hint of the face remained. She replaced the poker, turned her back to the fire and said, “Insufferable bureaucratic poppycock.”

“I’ll be happy to lodge Mr. Prescott in the Alma Aleron quarters.” Franklyn said, putting his glasses back on. “I’d prefer to keep a close eye on him, anyway. I suspect we can keep him busy enough to prevent him causing any more trouble.”

“I don’t like this at all,” Neville said, still looking at the fireplace. “Harry should be here. Prescott himself isn’t a dark wizard, of course, but there is something extremely dodgy about how he got here at all. Somebody led him here, and that person somehow circumvented the vow of secrecy. I don’t care what Sacarhina says, I’d feel a lot better with a decent auror looking into it.”

The headmistress opened her door. “At this point, it is out of our hands. Professor Franklyn, your idea is as good as any. Let us escort Mr. Prescott to the Alma Aleron quarters. And despite what Miss Sacarhina might believe, I’d prefer for us to arrange for Mr. Prescott to be quite busy for the next twenty-four hours. The less time he has to explore the school, the better. Mr. Potter, please feel free to return to your classes, and although I suspect I cannot ask you not to speak of this to Mr. Walker and Mr. Deedle, I’d be quite happy if you managed not to talk of it to anyone else. *Especially* Ted Lupin or Noah Metzker.”

As James followed the adults out of the office, a quiet voice spoke to him from the wall. “Going to be quite a busy day tomorrow, Potter.”

James stopped and glanced at the portrait of Severus Snape, not entirely sure what he meant. “I guess so. At least for the headmistress and everybody.”

Snape’s black eyes bored into him. “Answer me truthfully, Potter: are you still laboring under the delusion that Tabitha Corsica is in possession of the Merlin staff?”

“Oh,” James said, “look, say what you want, but it makes sense. We’re going to get it from her, too, one way or another.”

Snape spoke quickly. “Don’t be a fool, Potter. Turn over what you have. Give it to the Headmistress. Surely you see how dangerous it is to keep the robe, especially now.”

James blinked. “Why? What happens now? Does it have something to do with this Prescott fellow?”

Snape stared hopelessly at James. “You *don’t* see it, then,” he sighed. “There is a very good reason why your father, dull as he is, is being kept from accompanying tomorrow’s delegation. There are members of the Progressive Element even within the Ministry, although they do not call themselves by that name. Sacarhina is one of them. Recreant may be as well, although he is not really in charge. Either she is taking full advantage of a very suspicious coincidence, or this is all her plan from the beginning.”

“What? What’s her plan?” James asked, lowering his voice and stepping closer to the portrait.

“The details are unimportant. All that matters is that unless you secure the Merlin robe by tomorrow night, all will very likely be lost.”

“But it *is* secure,” James replied. “We captured it already. You know that. We have to get the Merlin staff now.”

“Forget the staff!” Snape hissed angrily. “You are allowing yourself to be manipulated! If I had even the slightest hope that you’d be any better at it than your father was, I’d have taught you occlumency by now. When I tell you to secure the Merlin robe, I mean you must turn it over to those who know how to bind it, not just hide it. The enemy has the other two relics. The robe *wishes* to be reunited with them. You will not be able to prevent that, Potter. Don’t be the arrogant fool your father was!”

James scowled. “My father was *never* the arrogant fool you think he was, and I’m not either. I don’t have to listen to you. Besides, tomorrow isn’t the alignment of the planets. It’s the next night. Zane told me himself.”

Snape grinned maliciously. “So trusting are you both. Where, pray tell, does Mr. Walker get his information?”

“He’s in Constellations Club,” James replied angrily. “Madame Delacroix’s been using everybody in the club to help her pinpoint the exact timing of the alignment.”

“And did it never occur to you that she might have deliberately altered the information just enough to mislead those too ignorant to notice? She has known the *day* of the alignment for the past year. She only needed help to ascertain the *hour*. Even you have realized that she is involved in the Merlin plot. Do you expect that she would desire dozens of stargazing students to be swarming the grounds on the very night she plans to skulk off to facilitate the return of the most dangerous wizard of all time?”

James felt sheepish. Of course she wouldn't. He just hadn't thought of it. He opened his mouth to speak, but could think of nothing to say. Snape went on. “She has misled all of you by exactly one day. The Hall of Elders' Crossing will not occur Thursday night, but Wednesday. Tomorrow, Potter. You have been duped, and you are being duped still. There is no time for any more delusions of grandeur. You must turn over the robe. If you do not, you will fail and our enemies will succeed in their plan.”

“James?” It was Neville. He poked his head into the Headmistress' doorway. “We lost you, it seems. Did you forget something?”

James mind was running at full speed. He stared blankly at Neville for a few seconds, and finally gathered himself. “Er, no. No, sorry, I was just... thinking out loud.”

Neville glanced at the portrait of Snape. Snape sighed and crossed his arms. “Go on, Longbottom, and take the boy with you. I've no use for him.”

Neville nodded. “Come along, James. You still have time to make your afternoon classes if you hurry. I'll walk with you and explain your tardiness.”

James followed Neville out of the room, thinking only of what Snape had told him. They had only one day; one day to get the Merlin staff from Tabitha. One day before the Hall of Elders' Crossing, and it just happened to be the very same day that Sacarhina was coming to deal with Prescott. As he rode down the moving spiral stairs and came out into the corridor below, it occurred to James that Snape was right about one thing: tomorrow was indeed going to be a very busy day.