



## 8. THE GROTTO KEEP

Zane, James and Hardcastle climbed onto Grawp's back as the giant squatted down. James and Zane both clambered onto a shoulder, gripping Grawp's ragged shirt for support. Hardcastle, apparently oblivious to how ridiculous it might look, straddled the back of Grawp's neck like a kid being carried by his dad. He held his lit wand up and out, spreading a halo of light onto the ground around them, and then directed Grawp toward the lake. As they left, Harry and Ted were still working out the best method to get onto Prechka's shoulders.

"Do we need a ladder, you think?" Ted called.

"Get her to bend all the way over, with her hands on the ground," Harry called, waving up to the she-giant, who had kneeled but become distracted by Hagrid's garden. She pulled up a handful of pumpkins, roots and all, and began stuffing them into her mouth.

“That’s right, that’s right,” Hagrid called soothingly. “Just lean over here a bit. There we go. Oh!”

There was a sharp wooden crunch as Prechka leaned on Hagrid’s wagon, crushing it to kindling.

Hagrid patted the gigantic elbow, shaking his head. “Oy, at least you can climb up now, Harry. Just use the wall there as a step. There you go.”

Prechka was being coaxed upright again, Harry and Ted perched on her shoulders, when Grawp entered the woods lining the west side of the lake and all view of the Hogwarts grounds vanished behind dense, stunted trees.

Grawp was surprisingly gentle, turning sideways and ducking to avoid branches that might knock his cargo off his back. James could feel the weight of Grawp’s footsteps pressing into the ground far below, but experienced none of the shudder and thump he had expected to feel riding on a giant’s back. Hardcastle directed Grawp quietly, being seated almost right next to the giant’s ear. He led them in an orderly zig-zag, approaching the lake, and then turning back into the thick of the wood again, slowly advancing around the perimeter. Their progress was slow and the motion of Grawp’s walking began to rock James into sleepiness. He shook himself awake, studying the ground below for any of the signs his dad had described. In an attempt to keep himself awake, he explained to Hardcastle and Zane how he had seen the unidentified man on the Quidditch pitch. He told them about the camera, and described the other two times he’d seen the man on the grounds.

“You’ve seen this person three times, then?” Hardcastle asked, his voice a gravelly monotone.

“Yeah,” James nodded.

“But apart from your dad tonight, no one else has seen him at all?”

James felt rankled by that, but answered directly. “No. Nobody.”

They were silent again for a while. James guessed that they had travelled approximately a third of the way around the perimeter. He saw glimpses of the castle looming over the lake whenever they neared its edge. The woods seemed annoyingly untouched and normal. Crickets buzzed and creaked, filling the night air with their strange chorus. Everywhere James looked, fireflies stitched the shadows, going about their nocturnal business. There was no sign that anyone had ever been through this wood, much less anyone recently.

“Stop, Grawp.” Hardcastle said suddenly, his voice tense. Grawp stopped obediently and stood still. His massive head turned slightly as he looked around. James peered around Grawp’s enormous, dirty ear, trying to see what Hardcastle was looking at or listening for. Half a minute crept by. James knew not to speak. Then, in the near distance, there was a harsh scurrying sound. Something scrambled, unseen, through the fallen leaves and stopped again. A branch creaked, as if it were being stepped on. James’ heart was suddenly pounding. Still, neither Grawp nor Hardcastle moved. James saw Hardcastle turn his head slightly, trying to pinpoint the direction of the sound.

It came again, nearer this time, but still unseen. It was ahead of them, behind a low rise on the woods-side of their path. James couldn't help thinking that there was something distinctly inhuman about the scurrying sound. It was, somehow, too busy. The hair at the base of his neck prickled.

Hardcastle tapped the back of Grawp's head lightly and pointed toward the ground, reaching so Grawp could see his hand. James felt the giant lower, and was surprised again at the slow grace of the motion. The leaves underfoot crackled only slightly as Grawp put his hands on the ground. Hardcastle slid silently off Grawp's back. His eyes were locked on the low rise ahead.

"Stay with-"

He was interrupted by the noise scrambling movement. It was much closer this time, and now James saw the motion of it. Dead leaves scattered into the air as a large, shadowy form scuttled over the rise, moving with horrible speed. It darted in and out of the trunks of the trees, crashing through bushes. It seemed to have far too many legs, and there was a strange bluish glow emanating from its front. It flickered wildly as the thing moved. Hardcastle leaped in front of Grawp as the thing approached. He flicked his wand with the practiced economy of a trained auror, sending red stunning spells into the thrashing brush and leaves. The creature changed course, skirting around them and into a gully. The flickering blue glow marked its progress as it skittered over dead logs, retreating deeper into the wood.

"Stay with Grawp, you two," Hardcastle growled, setting off after the creature at a run. "Grawp, if anything other than me comes back, crush it." He moved with amazing agility for his size. Within fifteen seconds, neither he nor the retreating creature could be seen or heard. The two boys jumped off Grawp's shoulders to peer down into the gully.

"What *was* that?" Zane asked breathlessly.

James shook his head. "I'm not even sure I want to know. It definitely wasn't the guy we're looking for."

"I'm glad of that." Zane said with conviction.

They watched the gully that Hardcastle and the creature had vanished into. The incessant chorus of crickets and the flashing of the fireflies filled the woods again, seeming to deny that anything unusual was happening. There was no noise or movement from the gully.

"How far will he chase that thing?" Zane finally asked.

James shrugged. "Until he catches it, I guess."

"Or it catches him." Zane added, shuddering. "You know, I felt a lot better about this when we were up on the big guy's shoulders."

"Good idea," James agreed, turning. "Hey Grawp, how about-"

He stopped. Grawp was gone. Zane and James glanced around for several seconds, both too stunned and spooked to say anything. “There!” Zane said suddenly, stabbing a finger in the direction of the lake. James looked. Grawp was just disappearing around a gigantic, moss-bearded boulder, lumbering slowly. “Come on! Don’t let him get out of sight!”

Both boys scampered after the giant, crawling over huge fallen trees and slipping on leaf covered rocks. They rounded the house-sized boulder they had seen Grawp pass. Grawp was even further away, ducking under a leaning, dead tree.

“Where’s he going?” Zane cried exasperatedly.

“Grawp!” James called, hesitant to yell too loudly for fear of attracting any more of the horrible, scuttling creatures. The night had gone dim. Heavy, marching clouds obscured the moon, reducing the woods to a muddle of grey shadows. “Grawp, come back! What are you doing?”

For several minutes, Zane and James followed Grawp’s trail, struggling through creek beds and over tree trunks that the giant traversed in one step. Finally, they caught up to him near the edge of the lake, where a group of small, wooded islands obscured the view across the water. The air smelled damp and mossy and was dense with buzzing insects. Grawp stood under a gnarled tree, methodically plucking walnuts off the branches and popping them into his mouth, shell and all. He crunched them audibly as the boys approached, panting.

“Grawp!” Zane cried, struggling to catch his breath. “What’re you doing?”

Grawp glanced down at the sound of Zane’s voice, his expression quizzical. “Grawp hungry,” he answered. “Grawp smell food. Grawp eat and wait. Little man comes back.”

“Grawp, we’re lost now! Titus won’t even know where we are!” James said, trying to control his anger. Grawp stared at him, still crunching walnuts, his expression one of mild bewilderment.

“Never mind.” Zane said. “Let him chomp some nuts, then we’ll get him to carry us back the way we came.” He plopped onto a nearby rock and examined the scrapes and bruises he’d gotten during the chase. James grimaced in annoyance. He knew there was no point in arguing with the giant.

“All right,” he said tersely. “Grawp, just carry us back when you’re done. Got it?”

Grawp grunted agreement, pulling one of the larger tree branches down to him so that it creaked ominously.

James wandered disconsolately toward the water’s edge, pushing reeds and bushes aside. The lake looked more like a creek here, with only a narrow stretch of mossy water between the shore and one of the marshy islands. The island was wild, covered with densely packed bushes and trees. It had the look of a place that was underwater at least part of the year. Twenty feet away, a group of trees had fallen away from the

island. James assumed they'd been pried loose from their watery roots by a recent storm. The scene was remarkably ugly and foreboding in the shadowy night.

James had just decided to turn back, worried that Hardcastle would be looking for them, when the moon came out. As the silvery light spread across the woods, James stopped, a slow, gravid chill shaking him from head to toe. The crickets had fallen suddenly and completely silent. James felt rooted to the spot, frozen except for his eyes, which roamed the surrounding woods. The silence of the crickets wasn't the only change. The perpetual, myriad flashes of the fireflies had also ceased. The wood had gone completely and suddenly still in the wash of moonlight.

"James?" Zane's voice came, tentative in the sudden, oppressive silence. "Is this... you know... normal?" He joined James at the edge of the lake. "And what's the deal with *that* place?"

James glanced at Zane. "What place?" He followed Zane's eyes, and then gasped.

The island that lay just off the shore had changed. James could tell that no individual part of it was different, exactly. It was just that, what had appeared as totally random trees and bushes a minute before, now, in the silvery moonlight, looked much more like a hidden, ancient structure. There was the unmistakable suggestion of pillars and gates, buttresses and gargoyles, all crafted out of the island's natural growth as if it were a sort of incredibly complex optical illusion.

"I do *not* like the look of that joint." Zane said emphatically, his voice low.

James looked further. The group of trees that had fallen across the water, connecting the island to the shore, had changed as well. James could see that there was order to them. Two of them had fallen together so that they formed what was obviously a bridge. The bridge was even stylized, fashioned to resemble a gigantic dragon's head. A brown rock jutting from the upturned roots served as the eye. Two more trees, only half collapsed, formed the open upper jaw, jutting out over the bridge as if to snap down on anyone that attempted to cross.

James walked carefully toward the bridge.

"Hey, you're not going in there, are you?" Zane called. "That doesn't look so healthy to me."

"Come on," James said, not looking back. "You said you wanted adventure and really wild stuff."

"Well, actually I think I just want those things in little bitty doses. I had enough with that crazy monster we saw already, if you don't mind."

James skirted an outcropping of bushes and spindly trees and found himself standing at the mouth of the bridge. Closer to, it was even more perfect. There were handrails formed by fallen birches, smooth and easy to grip, and the two trees that formed the floor of the bridge were so close together, with vines and leaves packed between them, that they made an easy walking surface.

“Fine, stay here,” James said, not really blaming Zane for his reluctance. The mystery of it was strangely attractive to James, though. He stepped onto the bridge.

“Ahh, sheesh,” Zane moaned, following.

On the island side of the bridge, a complicated growth of vines and small trees had formed into a set of tall, ornate gates. Beyond them was impenetrable shadow. As James crept closer, he could see that the vines formed a recognizable pattern across the gates.

“I think it spells something,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. “Look. It’s a poem, or a rune or something.”

As soon as he was able to make out the first word, the rest sprang into view, as if he’d just had to train his eye to see it. He stopped and read aloud:

*When by the light of Sulva bright*

*I found the Grotto Keep;*

*Before the night of time requite*

*Did wake his languid sleep.*

*Upon return the fretted dawn*

*With not a relic lossing;*

*Bygone a life, a new eon,*

*The Hall of Elders’ Crossing.*

Something about the poem made James shudder.

“What’s it mean?” Zane asked when he’d read it over twice.

James shrugged. “Sulva is an old word for moon. I know that. I think the first part just means you can only find this place when the moon shines on it. That’s got to be true, because when I first saw it in the dark, it just looked like some ugly old island. So this must be the Grotto Keep, whatever that is.”

Zane leaned in. “What about this part? ‘Upon return the fretted dawn’. Sounds like we’re supposed to come back when the sun comes back up, eh? Sounds pretty good to me.”

Ignoring Zane, James wrapped his hands around the gates and gave them a hard yank. They rattled woodenly but didn't budge. The action seemed to trigger a response from the island. A sudden, creeping sound came from beneath the boys' feet. James glanced down, and then jumped backwards as tendrils of thorny vines grew up from underneath the bridge. The vines twined through the gate, weaving up it with a noise like a newspaper in a fire. The thorns were an ugly purple color, as if they might contain some sort of venom. They grew longer as James watched. After a minute, the gates were completely entwined with them, obscuring the words of the poem. The noise of their growth died away.

"Well, that settles that then," Zane said in a strangely high voice. He was standing behind James, backing away slowly. "I think this place wants to be left alone, don't you?"

"I want to try one more thing," James said, pulling his wand out from beneath his cloak. Without really thinking about it, he aimed his wand at the gate. "Alohomora."

There was a streak of golden light, and this time, the result was immediate and powerful. The gates repelled the spell, obliterating it in a burst of sparks, and the entire island seemed to shiver, to tense menacingly. There was a sound like a thousand people suddenly breathing in, and then a voice, an entirely inhuman, swarming sort of voice, spoke.

"Get... Thee... Hence!"

James stumbled backwards at the vehemence of the response, tumbling into Zane and knocking them both to the floor of the bridge. The bridge shuddered beneath them, and then James saw that the gates were swaying, leaning over them. The trees overhead, the ones that were fashioned to appear as the upper jaw of the dragon's head bridge, were creaking down, looming, their broken branches looking more and more like teeth.

"Get... Thee... *Hence!*" the island said again. The voice sounded like it was comprised of millions of tiny voices, whispering and raspy, speaking in unison.

The floor of the bridge buckled, tearing loose of the shore. The upper jaws crackled and began to collapse, ready to devour the two boys. They scrambled backwards, tumbling wildly over each other, and fell onto the weedy shore just as the bridge ripped loose. The gigantic jaws snapped and gnashed ferociously. Broken branches and bits of bark exploded from the writhing shape, peppering James and Zane as they scuttled away, their hands slipping on dead leaves and pine needles.

The ground rumbled under them. Roots began to burrow up from the dirt, tearing the earth apart. James felt the shore disintegrate beneath him. His foot slipped into a sudden hole and he yanked it out, narrowly avoiding a dirty, carrot-like root that writhed up out of it. He struggled for purchase on the collapsing shore, but it sank beneath him, dragging him back toward the water's edge. The surface of the lake roiled, rushing into the forming sinkhole. The boys' feet splashed into the muck, and it sucked at them, pulling them in. Zane grasped at the shore as he was pulled slowly into the frothing water. James groped for



purchase, but nothing seemed solid. Even the tree roots revealed by the crumbling earth grew loose and slippery under his hands, covered in a horrible slime that came off in coats.

Then, suddenly, there was Grawp. He dropped to his knees, gripping a nearby tree trunk with one hand and reaching for Zane, who was nearer, with the other. He plucked the boy from the murk and plopped him onto his shoulder. Zane grasped for a hand-hold on Grawp's shirt as the giant lunged down to retrieve James, who was nearly submerged in the thrashing waters. A horrible, hairy root snaked across the water and curled around James' ankle, yanking him back. He hung there, caught between Grawp's grip and that of the horrid root, and James was sure he'd be torn in half by the force of it. The root slipped on his pant leg and yanked his shoe off. James saw it twine hungrily around the shoe and pull it under the surface.

Grawp tried to stand, but roots were ripping up from the ground all around him. Huge, crackling wood tentacles twined his legs. Green vines grew with lightning speed up the thicker tentacles, sewing themselves into the fabric of his pants with tiny, threadlike roots. Grawp roared and yanked, ripping his pants and tearing the roots further out of the ground, but their combined force was too strong. They pulled him back to a kneeling position, and then lunged up, circling his waist, climbing his back and shoulders. The vines battened onto James and Zane, threatening to pull them off. Grawp roared again as one of the green vines twisted around his neck, forcing him lower, pulling him down into the sinkhole.

Just as James began to slip off Grawp's shoulder, pulled back toward the ground by a dozen muscling vines, sudden, shocking light filled the air. It was a vibrant golden green, and it was accompanied by a low humming sound. The vines and roots recoiled from the light. They loosened, repulsed by it, but were dreadfully reluctant to abandon their prey. Waves of the light washed over them, and each wave loosened the tangling mass until the smaller vines fell away as dead and the larger roots retreated, sucking back down into the earth with a nasty, gurgling noise.

Grawp, James and Zane half-fell, half crawled up the bank until they found firm ground. There they collapsed, panting and heaving, amid the dead leaves and broken branches.

When James rolled over and pulled himself to a kneeling position, there was a figure standing nearby, glowing faintly with the same golden green light that had repulsed the vines. James could see through the figure, although what he saw through it was both brightened and refracted, the way things might look if seen through a raindrop. The figure looked like a woman, very tall and very thin, in a dark green gown that fell straight from her hips and, apparently, right through the ground. Her whitish-green hair spread and flowed around her head like a corona. She was beautiful, but her face was grave.

"James Potter, Zane Walker, Grawp, son of the earth, you are in danger here. You must leave this wood. No human is safe under this canopy now."

James struggled to his feet. "Who are you? What was that?"

"I am a dryad, a spirit of the wood. I have managed to silence the Voice of the Island, but I won't be able to hold it back for long. It grows more restless with each day."



“A spirit of the wood?” Zane asked as Grawp helped him rather roughly to his feet. “The woods have a ghost?”

“I am a dryad, a tree sprite, a spirit of a single tree. All the trees in the wood have spirits, but they have been asleep for ages and ages, seeped down into the earth, almost diminished. Until now. The naiads and dryads have been awakened, though we know not why. Those few humans that once communed with the trees are gone and forgotten. Our time is past. Yet we are summoned.”

“Who summoned you?” James asked.

“We have not been able to know that, despite our greatest efforts. There is disharmony among us. Many trees remember only the saw of man, not his re-planting. They are old and angry, wishing only to do harm to the world of men. They have gone over. You have experienced their wrath, though not as they would have it.”

“What do you mean they’ve ‘gone over’?” Zane asked, taking half a step closer, squinting at the dryad’s beauty. “Is it that place? The Island? The... the Hall of Elder’s Crossing?”

“Man’s time is short on the earth, but we trees watch the years march past like days. The stars are motionless to you, but we watch and study the heavens as a dance,” the dryad said, her voice becoming soft, almost dreamy. “Since our awakening, the dance of the stars has become dire, showing a thousand dark destinies for the world of men, all swinging on the balance of the coming days. Only one possible destiny bears good. The rest are heavy with bloodshed and loss. Great sorrow. Dark times, full of war and greed, powerful tyrants, famines of terror. Much will be determined within the closing of this cycle. We tree folk can only watch, for now, but those of us who remain faithful to the memory of harmony between our world and the world of men, when the time comes, we will help as we can.”

James was almost hypnotized by the dryad’s voice, but he felt a rising sense of helplessness and frustration at her words. “But you said there is one chance we can avoid this war. What can we do? How can we make the one good destiny happen?”

The dryad’s face softened. Her large, liquid eyes smiled sadly. “There is no way to predict the path of a single action. It could be that you are already doing that which will bring about peace. It could also be that the very things you do to for good are the things that will result in war. You must do what you know to do, but only with an unclouded mind.”

Zane risked a derisive laugh. “Helpful stuff, there, Sensei.”

“There are greater dangers in the fabric of destinies than you yet know, James Potter,” the dryad said, slipping closer to James so that her light played across his face. “The enemy of your father, and of all who know love, is dead. But his blood beats within a different heart. The blood of your greatest enemy lives still.”

James felt his knees grow watery. He wobbled, and then threw his hand out, pressing it against a nearby tree for support. “Vol... Voldemort?” he whispered.

The dryad nodded, apparently unwilling to say the name. “His preferred plan was thwarted forever by your father. But he was infinitely crafty. He prepared a second plan. A successor, a bloodline. The heart of that bloodline beats today, at this moment, not one mile hence.”

James’ lips were trembling. “Who?” he asked in a barely audible voice. “Who is it?”

But the dryad was already shaking her head sadly. “We are prevented from knowing. Not from without, but from within. Those trees that have gone over work against us, fog our vision, keep many of us asleep. We can only know of that heartbeat, that it is there, but no more. You must beware, James Potter. Your Father’s battle is over. Yours begins.”

The dryad was fading. Her eyes slipped shut and even as she drifted into nothingness, she already seemed to be asleep.

There was a creaking groan, then a splash from the island.

“Well,” Zane said with manic cheerfulness, “What say we jump back onto our giant buddy’s shoulders and make this place a memory before it does the same to us?”

The three of them met Titus Hardcastle before they were half-way back to their starting point. His face was like a thunderstorm, but all he said was, “Is everyone safe?”

“Safe enough,” Zane called down from Grawp’s shoulders. “But let me tell you, we’ve had one weird time of it.”

Grawp bent down to allow Hardcastle to climb onto his back. “It’s going around, then, isn’t it?” Hardcastle grunted.

Zane held a hand out, intending to help Hardcastle climb up and almost getting yanked from his seat instead. “So what was that thing you were chasing, anyway?” he said, puffing.

“Spider. One of old Aragog’s kin, no doubt. They’ve grown dumb in the last decade or two, but that one had gone and found himself a toy.” Hardcastle held something up, and James saw that it was the little hand-held video camera that the intruder had been using on the Quidditch pitch. “It was still working when I caught up to the brute, the little screen all lit up. Got broken when I, er, dispatched the beast. At least it’d had a good last meal.”

James shuddered involuntarily as Grawp began to make his way back through the woods. “You really think it... ate the guy?”

Hardcastle set his jaw. “Circle of life, James. Strictly speaking, though, spiders don’t eat people. They just suck their juices out. Ugly way to go, but at least he’s not a problem anymore.”

James didn’t say so, but he had a feeling that the real problems were just beginning.



Wednesday morning, James felt sluggish and prickly as he entered the Great Hall for breakfast. It was a thoroughly glum morning, with a low, bruised sky filling the top portion of the Hall and a fine mist speckling the windows. Ralph and Zane were seated at the Slytherin table, Zane blowing on his traditional morning coffee and Ralph attacking an orange with a butter knife, sawing through it peel and all. They didn't appear to be talking much. Zane wasn't typically a morning person, and he had been out just as late as James had been. Neither Zane nor Ralph looked up, and James was glad. He was still angry and disgusted with Ralph. Under that, though, he was sad and hurt about the boy's betrayal. He tried not to feel resentment toward Zane for sitting with Ralph, but he was too tired to make much of an effort, and the mood of the morning wasn't helping.

James made his way to the Gryffindor table, glancing up at the dais as he went. Neither his dad nor Titus Hardcastle were anywhere to be seen. James figured that, despite the lateness of the previous night, they had still risen and breakfasted shortly after dawn and were already about their morning's business. The thought that his dad's and Titus' day was already well under way, probably full of exciting meetings and secret intrigues, while he was just now having breakfast on his way to a day of gloomy classes and homework, filled him with melancholy. He found a seat surrounded by happily babbling Gryffindors, plopped into it, and began to eat methodically, joylessly.

The night before, James had been up with Titus Hardcastle, his dad and Headmistress McGonagall for almost two hours after their return from the perimeter of the lake. Titus had sent up a wand signal as soon as they'd reached the castle, summoning Harry, Ted, Prechka and Hagrid back from their forays. When they'd all assembled again by Hagrid's cottage, the headmistress dismissed Grawp and Prechka, thanking them both formally and offering them a barrel of butterbeer for their efforts. After that, the group convened in Hagrid's cottage, congregated around the huge, rough table, drinking Hagrid's tea, which was suspiciously cloudy and brown and tasted vaguely medicinal, and avoiding some rather stale biscuits.

Hardcastle had spoken first. He explained to everyone present how he had first heard the spider, and then pursued it, leaving James and Zane in the protection of Grawp. Harry had shifted in his seat, but

refrained from comment. After all, he had been the one to request that James go along on the expedition, and had consented, albeit reluctantly, to Zane's accompaniment. The headmistress had pointed a rather long and penetrating glare at Harry when she'd seen Zane enter the cottage. Now, McGonagall turned to Hardcastle, asking how he'd managed to kill the spider.

Hardcastle's beady eyes glinted a little as he said, "Best way to kill a spider that won't fit under your boot is to get its legs off. First one's the hardest. After that, it gets easier and easier."

Hagrid wiped a hand over his face. "Poor old Aragog. If he'd lived to see his young turn wild, it'd have killed him. Poor fellow was just doing what spiders do. You can hardly blame him."

"The spider had the intruder's camera," Harry said, glancing down at the broken object on the table. The lens was shattered and the little screen on the back was cracked. "So we know the man escaped via the lake woods."

"Nasty way to go, whoever he may have been." McGonagall said.

Harry's expression didn't change. "We don't know for certain that the spider caught the man."

"Seems unlikely the thing asked to borrow his camera so it could make home movies of its kids, doesn't it?" Hardcastle rumbled, "Spiders aren't the polite type. They're the hungry type."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "You're probably right, Titus. Still, there's always the chance the intruder dropped the camera and the spider simply found it. It wouldn't hurt to increase security for a while, Minerva. We don't yet know how this person got in, or who he was. Until we learn those things, we have to assume there is an ongoing risk of breach."

"I'm particularly interested in knowing how this camera managed to operate within the grounds," The headmistress sniffed, staring hard at the device on the table. "It is well-known that Muggle equipment of this sort doesn't work inside the school's magical environment."

"That is indeed well known, Madame Headmistress," Hardcastle rumbled, "but very little understood. The Muggles are endlessly inventive with their tools. What once was true may not be so anymore. And we all know that the protective spells erected around the grounds since the Battle are not quite as perfect as those maintained by old Dumbledore, God rest his soul."

James thought of Ralph's GameDeck, but decided not to mention it. The broken video camera was all the proof they needed that at least some modern Muggle devices worked on the school grounds.

Finally, attention turned to James and Zane. James explained how Grawp had wandered away in search of food, and how the two boys had chased him, finding him by the lake and the marshy island. Zane chimed in then, describing the mysterious island and the bridge. He carefully glossed over the part where James had tried to open the gates using magic, and James was glad. It had seemed foolish the very moment he'd done it, and he regretted it. Still, at the time, it had felt so natural. They took turns telling of the

enchanted dragon's head bridge that attempted to eat them, then the attacking vines that had almost pulled them all into the sinkhole. Finally, James explained the tale of the tree sprite.

"Naiads and dryands?" Hagrid exclaimed incredulously. James and Zane stopped, blinking at him. Hagrid went on, "Well, they're not for real, are they? They're just stories and myth. Aren't they?" He addressed the last question to the adults present.

"The lake woods are just an extension of the Forbidden Forest," Harry said. "If there is a place where things like the naiads and dryads can exist, it'd be there. Still, if it's true, they haven't been seen for hundreds of years. Of course we'd think of them as myth."

"What do you mean, 'if it's true'?" James asked, a little louder than he'd intended to. "We saw her. She spoke to us."

"Your father is being an auror, James." McGonagall said placatingly. "All possibilities must be considered. You were all under a great deal of stress. It isn't that we don't believe you. We must simply determine the most likely explanation for what you saw."

"Seems like the most likely explanation to *me* is that she was what she said she was." James muttered under his breath.

James purposely hadn't told his dad or any of the other adults the last thing the sprite had said, the part about the successor, the blood of the enemy beating in another heart. Part of his reluctance was in his remembrance of his dad's stories of how the wizarding world had treated him, Harry Potter, when he'd returned from the Triwizard Tournament maze with the tale of Voldemort's return, how he had been doubted and discredited. Another part of it was that his dad wasn't even prepared to believe the part about the dryad. If he doubted that, how could he accept that the dryad had predicted a new kind of Voldemort's return, through an heir, a bloodline? But the thing that had finally determined James not to tell was his memory of the very last words the dryad had spoken: *Your Father's battle is over. Yours begins.*

The conversation had droned on long after all the details had been described and discussed, long after James had grown bored with it. He wanted to get back so that he could sleep, but more than that, he wanted time to think about what the dryad had said. He wanted to work out what the Island was for, what the poem on the gate meant. He worked to remember it, itching to write it down while it was still fresh in his mind. He was sure, somehow, that it all fit in with the story of Austramaddux and the secret plot of the Slytherins to bring back Merlin and start a final war with the Muggle world. He wasn't even asking himself anymore if it was true. It *had* to be true, and it was up to him to prevent it.

Finally, the adults finished talking. They had determined that the mysterious Island, while obviously dangerous, was just one of the many mysterious and inexplicable dangers that made the Forbidden Forest forbidden. The primary concern was still discovering how the intruder had gotten in, and making sure no one else was able to do it again. With that resolution, the meeting broke up.

Headmistress McGonagall had accompanied James, Zane and Ted back to the castle, instructing them to do their best to keep the discussions of the night a secret.

“Especially you, Mr. Lupin.” she said sternly, “The last thing we need is you and your band of hooligans running off into the woods in the middle of the night attempting to duplicate Mr. Potter’s and Mr. Walker’s experiences.”

Fortunately, Ted knew enough not to try to deny the possibility of such a thing. He merely nodded and said, “Yes, Ma’am.”



James only saw his dad once more during his visit, and that was after classes that evening, just as Harry, Titus, and the Ministry officials were preparing to leave. Neville had returned to Hogwarts that afternoon, and he chaperoned James to the headmistress’s office to say goodbye to Harry and the rest. The group planned to travel via the floo network, as they had arrived, and had decided upon the headmistress’s fireplace for their departure since it was the most secure. If it struck Neville odd that the office now belonged to his former teacher, who he’d known as *Professor* McGonagall, instead of to Albus Dumbledore, he didn’t let on. But he did pause for a moment next to the portrait of the former headmaster.

“Off again, is he?” he asked Harry.

“I think he generally just sleeps here. Dumbledore’s got portraits all over the place.” Harry sighed. “Not to mention all his old chocolate frog cards. He still shows up in them sometimes just for fun. I keep mine in my wallet, just in case.” He pulled his wallet out and slipped a dog-eared card out of it. The portrait space was empty. Harry grinned at Neville as he put it back.

Neville moved to the group congregated around the fireplace. Harry squatted down next to James.

“I wanted to thank you, James.”

James hid the look of pride that surfaced on his face. “I was just doing what you asked us to do.”

“I don’t just mean coming along with us and helping us find out what happened,” Harry said, putting a hand on James’ shoulder. “I mean for spying the intruder on the field and pointing him out to me. And for being alert enough to see him the other times. You’ve got a sharp eye and an alert mind, my boy. I shouldn’t be surprised, and I’m not.”

James grinned. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Don’t forget what we talked about the other night, though. Remember?”

James remembered. “I won’t be saving the world single-handedly.” *I’ll have at least Zane’s help*, he thought, but didn’t say, *and maybe Ted’s, too, now that Ralph’s abandoned me*.

Harry hugged his son, and James hugged him back. They grinned at each other, Harry with his hands on James’ shoulders, and then he stood, leading James over to the fireplace.

“Tell Mum I’m doing good and eating my vegetables,” James instructed his Dad.

“And are you?” Harry asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Well. Yes and no.” James said, a bit uncomfortable as everyone looked at him.

“Make it true and I’ll tell her,” Harry said, removing his glasses and tucking them into his robe.

Moments later, the room was empty but for James, Headmistress McGonagall and Neville.

“Professor Longbottom,” the headmistress said, “I suspect it’d be best for me to inform you of all that has happened these past twenty-hours.”

“You mean regarding the campus intruder, Madame?” Neville asked.

The headmistress looked markedly taken aback. “I see. Perhaps I might simply be repeating myself, then. Do tell me what you’ve already heard, Professor.”

“Merely that, Madame. Word amongst the students is that a man was seen or captured on the Quidditch pitch yesterday. The common theory is that he was a representative of the gambling community either reporting on, or influencing the match. Pure rubbish, of course, but I assume it’s better to let tongues wag and inflate the tale to something ridiculous than to deny anything.”

“Mr. Potter would no doubt agree with you.” the headmistress said pointedly. “Although, since I will be requiring your services in increasing the security of the grounds, I should explain to you precisely what did occur. James, you are free to wait a moment, aren’t you? I shall not detain the professor for long, and he will accompany you down to the corridor.” Without waiting for a reply, she turned back to Neville, launching into a detailed account of the previous night.

James knew the whole story, of course, but still felt he was meant to wait near the door, as far from earshot as possible. It was uncomfortable and vaguely annoying. He felt rather proprietary about the



intruder, having been the first to see him, and having been the one to point him out on the Quidditch pitch. It was just like adults to deny something a kid said, then, when it proved true, to completely take over and dismiss the kid. He realized that this was another part of why he hadn't yet told any adults about his suspicions concerning the Slytherin-Merlin plot. He felt even stronger now about keeping that his secret, at least until he could prove something substantial.

James crossed his arms and hovered near the door, turning to look back at Neville, who was seated in front of the headmistress' desk, and McGonagall, who was pacing slightly behind it as she spoke.

"What are you up to, Potter?" a low voice drawled behind James, making him jump. He spun around wildly, eyes wide. The voice cut him off before he could respond. "Don't ask who I am and don't waste my time with a load of pointless lies. *You* know exactly who I am. And *I* know, even more than your own father, that you are *up* to something."

It was, of course, the portrait of Severus Snape. The dark eyes probed James coldly, the mouth turned down into a knowing sneer.

"I'm..." James began, and then stopped, feeling very strongly that if he lied, the portrait would know. "I'm not going to tell."

"A more honest answer than any ever provided by your father, at least." Snape drawled, keeping his voice low enough not to attract the attention of McGonagall or Neville. "It's a pity I'm not still alive to be headmaster or I'd find ways of getting the tale from you one way... or another."

"Well," James whispered, feeling a little braver now that shock had worn off. "I guess it's a good thing you aren't headmaster anymore, then." He thought it might be a bit too much to say *it's a good thing you're dead*. James's dad had a load of respect for Severus Snape. He'd even made Severus Albus's middle name.

"Don't try the smart tactic with me, Potter," the portrait said, but more tiredly than angrily. "You, unlike your father, know well enough now that I was as devoted to Albus Dumbledore and the downfall of Voldemort as was he. Your father believed it was up to him to win battles entirely on his own. He was foolish and destructive. Don't think I didn't see that very same look in *your* eye not five minutes ago."

James couldn't think what to say. He just met the portrait's dark gaze and frowned stubbornly.

Snape sighed theatrically. "Have it your way, then. Like Potter like son. Never learning the lessons of the past. But know this: I will be watching you, as I did your father. If your *unnamed* suspicions are, against all probability, accurate, be assured that I will be working toward the same end as you. Try, Potter, not to make the same mistakes as your father. Try not to leave others to pay the consequences for your arrogance."

That last stung James to the core. He assumed Snape would leave his portrait frame after a salvo like that, confident of having had the last word, but he didn't. He stayed, that same penetrating stare on his face,

reading James like a book. Still, there wasn't anything specifically malicious in that gaze, despite the pointed words.

"Yeah," James finally found the voice to say, "well, I'll keep that in mind." It was a lame response and he knew it. He was only eleven, after all.

"James?" Neville said behind him. James turned and looked up at the Professor. "Sounds like you had an exciting night last night. I'm curious about the vines that attacked you. Maybe you could tell me more about them sometime, yes?"

"Sure," James said, his lips feeling numb. When he turned back toward the door, following Neville out, the portrait of Snape was still occupied. The eyes followed him darkly as he left the room.