



## *12.* VISUM-INEPTIO

The first hurdle James, Ralph and Zane faced in capturing Jackson's briefcase was simply finding a case similar enough to make the switch. It was, as Zane had suggested, a fairly basic black leather case, rather more like a doctor's bag than a briefcase. They studied it carefully at dinner Monday evening, as it sat between the professor's black boots beneath the faculty table. It had two wooden handles on the top, a hinged brass catch, and was indeed rather beaten and scuffed. They were dismayed to discover that it had a small, tarnished brass plate riveted to one side with "T. H. Jackson" engraved on it. While it was, in most respects, an almost entirely unremarkable bit of luggage, the boys soon discovered that there was not, in fact, one exactly like it to be easily found. Plenty of students and faculty had leather cases and portfolios, but they were all either too narrow, or the wrong color, or of a rather different size or shape. By Tuesday night, they had still not found a case they could use to perform the switch. Ralph suggested that they might have to wait until the next week to perform the switch, but James was insistent that they keep trying.

“We don’t know when they’re planning to bring all the relics together,” he explained, “If we wait too long, they’ll try it and then we won’t have access to any of the relics at all. They’ll figure out they don’t work, and then hide them or destroy them.”

Ralph and Zane agreed, although it didn’t get them any closer to finding an appropriate case to use for the switch. Then, Wednesday morning, the day of Technomancy class, Ralph came to the breakfast table with a manic glint in his eye. He plopped down across from Zane and James and stared at them.

“What?” James asked.

“I think I’ve found a case we can use.”

James’ mouth dropped open and Zane audibly gulped the coffee he’d been sipping.

“What? Where?” James asked in a harsh whisper. He had decided they were going to have to wait after all, and had been simultaneously worried and relieved. Now, adrenaline shot through him. The rather wide-eyed paleness of Ralph’s face indicated he was feeling the same thing.

“You know my friend Rufus Burton?”

James nodded. “Yeah, another first year Slytherin. Greasy-haired kid, right?”

“Yeah. Well, he collects rocks and stuff. Calls himself a rock-hound. Has a whole bunch of polished little stones arranged on a shelf by his bed; crystals and quartzes and moon-sapphires and all that. I listened to him talking about it last night for almost an hour. Well, he brought all his rock hunting tools along with him to school, of course. He’s got a little hammer that’s a pick on one side, and a bunch of little scrapers and brushes and loads of these little cloths and polishing solutions,”

“All right, all right,” Zane said, “We get the picture. Guy’s a geek with tools. I’m spellbound. What’s the point?”

“Well,” Ralph said, unperturbed, “he carries all his tools and gear around in a case. He had it out on his bed last night...”

“And it’s the right size and shape?” James prompted.

Ralph nodded, still wide-eyed. “It’s almost perfect. Even has a little plaque on the side! It has the name of the manufacturer on it, but it’s in the same place as the little plate on Jackson’s case. The color’s different, and the handles are ivory, but other than that...”

“So how do we get it?” James asked breathlessly.

“I’ve already got it,” Ralph answered, seeming rather amazed at himself. “I told him I wanted a bag to carry my books and parchments in. Told him my backpack didn’t feel very, you know, *Slytherin*. He said he knew just what I meant. He said he’d gotten a new toolcase for Christmas, so I could have his old one.

That's why he had it out; he was taking everything out of the old one to put into his new case, which is bigger and has a hard dragonskin cover. Watertight, he told me." Ralph was beginning to ramble.

"He just said you could have it?" Zane asked incredulously.

"Yeah! I've got to tell you, it wiggled me out a bit. I mean, isn't that just a little too ... I don't know..."

"A little too much of a coincidence," Zane nodded.

James grew thoughtfully determined. "Where's the case now?"

Ralph looked a little startled. "I brought it down with me, but I hid it in one of the cubbyholes under the stairs. I didn't want anyone to see me with it in here. Just in case."

"Good thinking. Come on," James said, getting up.

"You still want to go through with it?" Ralph asked, following reluctantly. "I mean, we were going to wait until next week anyway..."

"That was only because we didn't have a choice."

"Well," Ralph muttered, "There's always a choice. I mean, we don't have to do it this way, do we? Couldn't one of us just hide under the invisibility cloak and make the switch when Jackson's not looking?"

Zane shook his head. "No way. There's too little room in there. Jackson would run you over doing one of his laps. If we're going to do it, this is the only way."

"Look, I think we're *meant* to do this," James said, turning to face Ralph and Zane when they got to the doorway. "If there is such a thing as destiny, then that's what put that case in your hands last night, Ralph. We can't miss this opportunity. It'd be like... like spitting in destiny's face."

Ralph blinked, trying to envision that. Zane scowled thoughtfully. "Sounds serious."

"You two still with me?" James asked. Both other boys nodded.

The case was still in the cubbyhole beneath the main staircase, and it was as similar to Jackson's as Ralph had described. It was a ruddy red color, and much more scuffed from having been drug through the dirt and rocks, but it was exactly the same size and shape, with a matching brass catch in the center. Ralph had already stuffed his dress cloak into it, and when James opened it to check, it looked almost exactly the way the cloth inside Jackson's case had looked when it had come open that day in Franklyn's classroom.

"Let's take it to the boys' bathroom in the upper cellars," James said, preceding the other two down the staircase. "It's just down the hall from Technomancy. Do you need anything special, Zane?"

“Just my wand and my notes,” Zane answered. Horace Birch had been more than happy to explain the visum-ineptio charm to Zane, but there’d been no opportunity for him to practice. Further, the charm would only work- if it worked at all- on anyone who didn’t know the charm was in place. The result was that neither James, Ralph or Zane would know if the charm was working. They’d just have to trust Zane’s spell-work until the switch had been accomplished and Jackson picked up the fake case. Only then, one way or another, would the effectiveness of the charm be shown.

In the boys’ bathroom, James plopped the case on the edge of the sink. Zane dug in his backpack for his wand and the bit of parchment he’d scribbled the visum-ineptio incantation on. He handed the parchment to Ralph.

“Hold it up so I can see it,” he instructed nervously. His hand was shaking visibly as he pointed his wand at the case. After a moment, he dropped his arm again. “This is all screwy. Ralph’s the wand-master. Can’t he try it?”

“Horace taught it to you,” James said impatiently. “It’s too late to show Ralph the wand motions. Class is in fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah,” Zane protested, “but what if I can’t get it to work? If Ralph gets it right, you *know* it’d be good enough to fool anybody.”

“And if he gets it wrong,” James insisted, “we’ll be picking bits of leather off the walls for the next hour.”

“I’m standing right here, remember?” Ralph said.

James ignored him. “You have to, Zane. You can do it. Just give it a go.”

Zane took a deep breath, and then raised his wand again, pointing it at the bag. He looked at the parchment as Ralph held it up. Then, in a low, sing-song voice he spoke.

“light immortal speeds the eye, for understanding’s vanity. Discordia, the fool’s ally, make expectation’s guarantee.”

Zane flicked his wand in three small circles, and then tapped the top of the case with it. There was a popping sound and a very faint ring of light appeared, emanating from the wand’s tip. The ring grew, slipping down over the case. It grew fainter until it vanished. Zane let out his breath.

“Did it work?” Ralph asked.

“It must have,” James said. “It looks the same to us, of course, but something happened, didn’t it? The charm must be in place.”

“I hope so,” Zane said. “Come on, we have to get to the classroom before anybody else gets there.”

They ran through the corridor, Zane and James watching for Professor Jackson and Ralph carrying the fake case with his winter coat draped over it.

“This looks stupid,” Ralph rasped. “I look about as casual as a Grawp in a tutu.”

James shushed him. “It doesn’t matter, we’re almost there.”

They stopped outside the door to the Technomancy classroom. Zane peered in, then turned back to James and Ralph.

“Plan B,” he said under his breath. “There’s somebody in there. A Hufflepuff. Can’t remember his name.”

James leaned around the corner of the door. It was a boy he vaguely recognized from Muggle studies class. His name was Terrence and he glanced up as James was looking.

“Hey Terrence,” James called, grinning. He sauntered into the room. Behind him, he heard Ralph and Zane whispering. He tried to drown out their voices. “So how was your holiday? Travel much?”

“I guess.” Terrence mumbled.

*This is going to be harder than expected,* James thought. “So where did you go? I took the train to London. Saw the family and everybody. Had loads of fun. You go anywhere fun?”

Terrence turned in his seat. “Went down to Cork with my mum. It rained most of the trip. Saw a flute concert.”

James nodded encouragingly. Fortunately, Terrence was seated halfway from the front, turned around toward James. Out of the corner of his eye, James saw Zane near Jackson’s desk, positioning the fake case. Terrence started to turn back toward the front of the room.

“A flute concert!” James blurted loudly, “Cool!”

Terrence turned back. “No,” he said. “It wasn’t.”

Zane stood up, giving James the all-clear signal. James saw him and sighed with relief. “Oh. Well. Sorry to hear it.” he said, backing away from Terrence. “Anyway. See you around.”

Zane and James took their planned seats in the front row. It was a small classroom and Jackson’s desk was only a couple of feet away. James scanned the front of the room, pleased to see that nothing seemed disturbed. He waited until a few more students came in, laughing and talking, and then whispered to Zane. “Where is it?”

“It’s in that little corner by the chalkboard. I left the cloak folded a little so it doesn’t drape onto the floor. I just hope old Stonewall doesn’t trip over it when he goes behind his desk.”

James looked into the corner that Zane indicated. It was just a shallow alcove formed where the closet next door butted into the room. It was unlikely that Jackson would venture there, but not impossible.

“Sometimes he doesn’t even go behind his desk all class,” James whispered. Zane gave a little lift and drop of the shoulders, as if to say *here’s hoping*.

A few minutes later, Professor Jackson strode into the room, carrying his ever-present leather bag. James and Zane couldn’t help watching intently as he draped his cloak over the desk and settled his briefcase into its accustomed space on the floor next to his desk.

“Greetings, class,” Jackson said briskly. “I trust you all had an instructive holiday. One can only hope you haven’t forgotten everything we worked so hard to instill in your heads prior to the break. Which reminds me. Please hand your essays to the left and then to the front. Mr. Walker, I will collect them from you once you have them all.”

Zane nodded, his eyes bulging a bit. Both James and Zane had their wands slipped up their sleeves. If Jackson noticed, they’d just say they were carrying them that way in honor of their favorite Technomancy teacher, since Jackson himself carried his in a small sheath sewn into his sleeve. Thankfully, Jackson seemed a bit preoccupied.

“I will be grading your essays tonight, as usual. Until then, let us take a sneak-peek, as it were, into your cumulative understanding of the subject. Mr. Hollis, please favor us with a short definition of Hechtor’s Law of Displaced Inertia, if you please.”

Hollis, a red-cheeked first year Ravenclaw, cleared his throat and began to offer his explanation. James barely heard him. He looked down at Jackson’s case, sitting tantalizingly only a few feet away. James thought he could probably kick it if he wished to. His heart pounded and he was filled with a horrible, icy certainty that the plan couldn’t possibly work. It had been ridiculously foolhardy to think they could pull such a caper under the prow-nose of Professor Jackson. And yet, he knew they had to try. He felt vaguely sick with anxiety. Jackson began to pace.

“Unnecessarily verbose, Mr. Hollis, but relatively accurate. Miss Morganstern, can you elaborate a bit regarding the transferrance of inertia between objects of different densities?”

“Well, different densities respond to inertia differently, based on the proximity of their atoms,” Petra answered. “A ball of lead will be launched in a single direction. A ball of, say, marshmallow will merely explode.”

Jackson nodded. “Is there a technomantic workaround for this? Anyone? Miss Goyle?”

Philia Goyle lowered her hand. “A binding spell coupled with the inertia-transferrance spell will keep even low-density substances intact, sir. This has the added benefit that low density projectiles will travel much farther and faster on a given factor of inertia than a higher density projectile, such as Miss Morganstern’s lead ball.”

“True, Miss Goyle, but not necessarily beneficial,” Jackson smiled humorlessly. “A feather shot out of a cannon still won’t hurt.”

The class laughed a little at that. Jackson was just beginning his second circuit of the room. Then, suddenly, Ralph was at the door.

“Excuse be,” he said in a strangely gurgly voice. Everyone in the class turned except James and Zane. “I’b sorry. I dseem to have a dosebleed.” Ralph’s nose was, indeed, bubbling blood at an alarming rate. He held his finger beneath it, and it was coated and slimy with blood. There was a chorus of *oohs* and *ahhs* from the class, some amused and some disgusted.

Zane wasted no time. As soon as he heard Ralph and saw that Jackson was turned away, heading up the right side of the classroom, he whipped his wand from his sleeve.

“*Wingardium leviosa!*” he whispered as quietly but as forcefully as he could. The invisibility cloak became visible the moment it whipped up, floating off the fake briefcase in the corner. Zane held it there as James fumbled his own wand out. Behind them, they heard Jackson speaking to Ralph.

“Good heavens, boy, hold still,”

“I’b sorry,” Ralph stammered. “I meant to get a cough lozenge and I ate one of thode Weadely Dosebleed Dougats instead. I have to get to the hodsipital wing, I think.”

James pointed his wand at the fake breifcase and whispered the levitating spell. The case was much heavier than anything James had levitated before, and he wasn’t very good at it under the best of circumstances. The case scuttled on the floor, dragging by a corner. He moved it as close to the real case as possible, knocking the real case aside and partially under the desk. He gasped, and then caught his breath. Behind him, the students were laughing and making disgusted noises.

“Good grief, you don’t need the hospital wing,” Jackson said, becoming annoyed. “Just stand still and move your finger.”

Ralph began to sway on his feet. “I think I’b a hemophebian!” he yelled. That had been Zane’s idea.

“You’re *not* a hemophiliac,” Jackson growled, “now for the last time hold still!”

James flicked his wand, trying to move the real case around the fake one. It was imperative that he move it into the corner and hide it under the invisibility cloak Zane was still levitating. The real case was stuck, however, wedged under a corner of the desk. James concentrated mightily. The briefcase levitated under the desk, pushing the corner of the desk up with it. James grimaced, lowering his wand, and both the case and the desk clunked to the floor. Nobody seemed to notice. Zane was looking at James wild-eyed. James made a grimace of helplessness. Desperately, Zane made to lower the invisibility cloak onto the real case where it was, wedged under the desk. Somehow, however, the cloak had also become snagged, caught on



a coat-hook next to the chalkboard. Nothing was going as planned. If anyone turned around now, there would be no hope of covering their tracks. James couldn't resist glancing around. Ralph's nose was still pattering blood. Jackson was half squatted in front of him, one hand on Ralph's arm, trying to pull Ralph's finger away from his nose, the other holding the hickory wand at the ready. The entire class was watching in various shades of amusement and revulsion.

"Drat it, boy, you're making a mess. Move your finger, I tell you," Jackson exclaimed.

James tried to free the real briefcase by working it back and forth with his wand. He was sweating and his wand hand was slick. The case finally came free just as James heard Jackson say "*Artemisae*."

"Oh!" Ralph said, rather unnecessarily loudly. "There, yes, that's much better."

"It'd have been better a minute ago if you'd have listened to me," Jackson said crossly, poking his wand back into his sleeve. The scene was over. Zane gave a final yank on his wand. The invisibility cloak popped loose from the coat-hook and dropped to the floor in a heap, which promptly vanished. James had no time to hide the briefcase. He sensed the class turning back toward the front of the room.

"Please go and wash yourself, young man," Jackson was saying, his voice becoming louder as he dismissed Ralph and turned toward the front of the room. "You're an awful sight. People will think you've been mauled by a quintaped." Under his breath, he added, "Nosebleed Nougat..."

Desperately, James stashed his wand back up his sleeve. Zane, in an act of pure split-second inspiration, shot his legs forward from underneath the desk. He grasped the real briefcase between his ankles, then yanked it back beneath his own desk. James heard the scuffling as Zane tried to stuff the case beneath his chair using only his feet. Jackson stopped next to Zane and the room became very quiet.

James tried not to look up. He had the strongest sensation that the professor was looking down at him. Finally, helplessly, he raised his eyes. Jackson was indeed looking down the length of his nose, his gaze moving thoughtfully between Zane and James. James' stomach plummeted. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Jackson continued to the front of the room.

"Honestly," he said to the class in general, "the lengths some of you will go to skip a class. It astounds someone even as cynical as myself. At any rate, where were we, then? Ah yes..."

The class wore on. James refused to meet Jackson's eyes. His only hope was to get out of the classroom as quickly as possible. There was no way to collect either the real briefcase or the invisibility cloak while Jackson was still there. Just possibly, however, Jackson wouldn't see his own case stuffed beneath Zane's chair. Everything rested, of course, on the effectiveness of Zane's visum-ineptio charm. James looked down at the false briefcase, sitting on the floor approximately where the real one had been. To his eye, it looked completely fake, its leather a different color and its brass plate reading "HIRAM & BLATTWOTT'S LEATHERS, DIAGON-ALLEY, LONDON", instead of "T. H. Jackson". Jackson had obviously sensed something. But if the charm worked, there was still the slightest chance they could pull it off.



Class finally concluded. James jumped up, herding Zane ahead of him. Zane shot him a look of pure consternation, his eyes darting toward the base of his chair, but James pushed him onward, shaking his head minutely. The class pressed toward the door, and James and Zane, having been seated in the front row, were stuck at the rear of the small throng. James was terrified to look back. Finally, the wall of shoulders and backpacks broke apart and James and Zane tumbled into the hallway.

“What’re we going to do?” Zane whispered frantically as they trotted down the corridor.

“We’ll come back later,” James said, struggling to keep his voice low and calm. “Maybe he won’t see anything. He was packing up the essays when we left. If we just hang back here around the corner we can watch—”

“Mr. Potter?” a voice said imperiously from behind them. “Mr. Walker?”

The two boys stopped in their tracks. They turned very slowly. Professor Jackson was leaning out of the door of the Technomancy classroom. “I believe you two may have left something in my classroom. Would you care to come collect it?”

Neither answered. They walked heavily back the way they had come. Jackson disappeared into the classroom again and was waiting behind the front desk when they got there.

“Come closer, boys,” Jackson said in a breezy voice. “Just right here, in front of the desk, if you please.” Placed on the desk in front of Jackson were both the real and the fake briefcases. When James and Zane got to the front of the desk, Jackson spoke again, this time in a low, cold voice.

“I don’t know who’s been telling you stories about what I keep in my attaché, but I can assure the both of you that yours is neither the first nor even the most creative attempt to find out for certain.” James raised his eyebrows in surprise and Jackson nodded at him. “Yes, I have heard the tales that some of my students have invented. Stories of horrible dormant beasts, or doomsday weapons, or keys to alternate dimensions, each more terrible and mind-boggling than the last. Let me assure you, though, my terminally curious little friends,” here Jackson leaned over his desk, bringing his nose less than a foot from the two boys’ faces. He lowered his voice further and spoke very clearly, “That which I keep hidden in my attaché is far, far worse than even your fevered imaginings can contrive. This is not a joke. I am not making idle threats. If you attempt to meddle with my affairs again, you will likely *not live to regret it*. Am I making myself perfectly clear?”

James and Zane nodded, speechless. Jackson continued to stare at them, breathing through his nose in obvious fury. “Fifty points from Gryffindor and fifty points from Ravenclaw. I’d give you both detentions, except that that might lead to questions about this case of mine that I do not wish to answer. Therefore, let me finish by saying, my young friends, that even if you do not so much as look at my attaché ever again, I can still choose to make your lives extremely... *interesting*. Please do bear that in mind. Now,” he stood back, lowering his eyes, “Take this pathetic little ruse and be gone.”

With palpable disgust, Jackson shoved his bag at them with the back of his hand. The fake bag remained sitting in front of him. He laced the knuckly fingers of his right hand through the ivory handles and hefted it. The brass plate that read “HIRAM & BLATTWOTT’S LEATHERS, DIAGON-ALLEY, LONDON” glinted dully as Jackson moved around the desk. Neither James nor Zane could quite bring themselves to touch the case in front of them.

“Well?” Jackson demanded, raising his voice, “Take that thing and be gone!”

“Y-yes sir.” Zane stammered, grabbing the professor’s bag and pulling it off the desk. He and James turned and fled.

Three corridors later, they stopped running. They stood in the middle of an empty hall and looked at the bag Jackson had insisted they take. There was no question about it. It was the professor’s own black leather briefcase. The name plate shone clearly, “T. H. Jackson”. James began to grasp that somehow, amazingly, they had succeeded. They had captured the robe of Merlin.

“It was the visum-ineptio charm,” Zane breathed, glancing up at James. “It had to be. Jackson knew we were up to something, but he didn’t expect that!”

James was completely bewildered. “How, though? He had both bags right in front of him!”

“Well, it’s pretty simple, really. Jackson assumed we were trying to swap the cases, but that we hadn’t gotten around to it yet. He found the case under my chair and believed it was the fake one. The visum-ineptio charm on the fake briefcase worked on *both* briefcases, letting him see what he expected to see. That’s how it preserved the illusion that the fake case was the real one!”

Understanding dawned on James. “The fool-the-eye charm extended to the *real* briefcase, making it look like the fake one, since that’s what Jackson expected! That’s brilliant!” James clapped Zane on the shoulder. “Nice one, you goon! And you doubted yourself!”

Zane looked uncharacteristically humble. He grinned. “Come on, let’s go find Ralph and make sure he’s okay. You really think he needed to eat two of those Nosebleed Nougats?”

“You’re the one that said we needed a diversion.”

James stuffed Jackson’s briefcase under his robe, clutching it under his arm, and the two boys ran to find Ralph, stopping only long enough to collect the invisibility cloak from the floor of the empty Technomancy classroom.

Five minutes later, the three boys clambered up to the Gryffindor common room, rushing to hide Jackson’s briefcase before their next class. James buried it in the bottom of his trunk, then Zane produced his wand.

“Just learned this new spell from Gennifer,” he explained, “It’s a special kind of locking spell.”

“Wait,” James stopped Zane before he could cast the spell. “How will I get it open again?”

“Oh. Well, I don’t know, to tell you the truth. It’s the counter spell to *alohomora*. I wouldn’t think it’d work against the owner of the trunk, though. Just anybody else. Spells are smart that way, aren’t they?”

“Here,” Ralph said, crossing the room. He opened and closed the window, then stood back. “Try it on the window latch. You don’t need that open, anyway. It’s dead cold out there.”

Zane shrugged, and then pointed his wand at the window. “*Colloportus*.” The window lock clacked shut.

“Well, it works, all right,” Ralph observed. “Now try to open it.”

Zane, wand still raised, said, “*Alohomora*.” The lock jiggled once, but remained locked. Zane pocketed his wand. “You try it, James. It’s your window, isn’t it?”

James used the same spell on the window lock. The lock unhinged neatly and the window swung open.

“See?” Zane grinned. “Spells are smart. I bet old Stonewall could tell us how that works, but I’m not going to be asking him any more questions, I’ll tell you that.”

James closed his trunk with Jackson’s case inside and Zane performed the locking spell on it.

On the way back down to their classrooms, Ralph asked, “Won’t somebody else notice that Jackson’s carrying a different briefcase? What if one of the other teachers asks him about it?”

“Not going to happen, Ralphinator,” Zane said confidently. “He’s been carrying that thing long enough that everyone expects to see him with it. As long as they *expect* to see his case in his hand, the *visum-ineptio* charm will make sure that *is* what they see. We’re the only ones that’ll see that it’s your buddy’s old rock-hound bag.”

Ralph still seemed worried. “Will the charm wear off over time? Or will it work as long as people think that the fake case is the real one?”

Neither James nor Zane knew the answer to that. “We just have to hope it lasts long enough.” James said.