



## 19. SECRETS UNVEILED

Harry joined James, Zane and Ralph for a very late breakfast in the house elf kitchens below the Great Hall. James noticed that the house elf operating the enormous stove bellows was the grumpy house elf who'd told the three boys they were on probation. He eyed them with unguarded suspicion, but didn't say anything. They crowded at a tiny table beneath an even tinier window and ate plates of kippers and toast and drank pumpkin juice and black tea. Finally, Harry suggested that the boys take a break and get cleaned up. They were still dressed in the clothes they had worn during the failed broomstick caper of the day before, and they were all decidedly grubby from their night in the forest. James was weary to the bone as well, and determined that he would collapse on his bed for at least ten minutes, school crisis or not.

On the way to the common room, James decided to take a detour to the hospital wing to collect his backpack. Philia Goyle and Murdock were no longer guarding the doors, of course, but James was surprised to see Hagrid crammed onto one of the benches nearby, flipping through a thick magazine called *Beasts and Boondocks*. He glanced up, closing the magazine.

“James, good to see yeh,” he said warmly, apparently trying to keep his voice quiet. “Heard yeh was back safe and sound. Seen your father, then, I’d wager?”

“Yeah, just left him,” James answered, peeking into the cracked doors of the hospital wing. “What are you doing here, Hagrid?”

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? I’m keepin’ watch, I am. Nobody in nor out ‘less it’s by permission o’ the headmistress. Needs his rest and ‘cuperation, after all he’s been through.”

“Who?” James asked, suddenly interested. He peered more closely into the crack between the doors. There was a shape lying still on one of the beds, but James couldn’t make out any features.

“Why Professor Jackson, a’course!” Hagrid said, standing and joining James by the doors. He peeked over James’ head with one beady black eye. “Haven’t you heard? Showed up in the courtyard ‘alf an hour ago, looking quite a fright,” he whispered. “Caused no end o’ commotion when the students out there caught sight of ‘im. We brought ‘im in here straight away and I was given the post of keepin’ an eye on the doors while Madam Curio ‘tended to ‘im.”

James looked up at Hagrid. “He’s injured?”

“That’s what we thought at first,” Hagrid said, stepping back. “But Madam Curio says he’s all right except for a few broken ribs, some burns on ‘is arms, a nasty bruise on the skull and about a million cuts and scratches. He’s been in a duel, she’s says, and a long one, at that. Happened during the night, out in the forest. That’s all we could get out of ‘im before he konked out.”

“A duel?” James repeated, knitting his brow. “But Delacroix broke his wand!”

“Did she?” Hagrid said, impressed. “Now why’d she go and do a thing like that, then?”

“She was the one he was dueling against, Hagrid,” James said tiredly. “He and she... look, I’ll explain later. But I saw her break his wand in two pieces. I saw the bits. He left them behind.”

“Weerrrl...” Hagrid said, resuming his seat and producing a long, pained groan from the bench. “He’s American, y’ know. They like to carry more’n one wand around. Comes from all that old wild West lore and all. They sticks ‘em in their boots and up their sleeves and hide ‘em in their canes and such. Everybody knows that, don’t they?”

James peered into the crack of the hospital doors again, but he still couldn’t make anything of the shape on the mattress. “Sorry, Professor,” he said quietly. “But I hope you gave her royal hell.”

“What’s that, James?” Hagrid said, glancing up.

“I just came for my backpack,” James answered quickly. “I left it in there last night.”

“I don’t s’pose yeh might want to come back later for it, would yeh?” Hagrid asked earnestly. “Only I’ve got my orders, here. Nobody in nor out. The headmistress thinks that whoever attacked Jackson might come looking for him. Can’t rule out it was that crazy nutter pretending to be Merlin.”

“It was Delacroix, Hagrid. But, yeah. I can come back later. Good work.”

Hagrid nodded, and then flopped his magazine open onto his lap again. James turned and headed back the way he’d come.

The Gryffindor common room was empty. The fire in the grate had burned down to red embers, but it had warmed up enough outside that it wasn’t necessary anyway. In fact, as James headed up the stairs to the sleeping quarters, he felt a gust of cool, fresh air push past him. Someone had apparently left a window open upstairs. He was just wondering if he should shut it or not when he topped the landing and saw Merlin reclined comfortably on his bed.

“Here is my little counselor, after all,” Merlin said, looking up and lowering James’ Technomancy textbook.

James glanced at the open window next to his bed, then back to Merlin. “You,” he said, his mind boggling slightly. “Did you...?” He pointed uncertainly at the window.

“Did I fly in through it?” Merlin said, laying the book aside almost reverently. “Lofted upon the wings of my sky-borne brethren? What do you think, James Potter?”

James closed his mouth, realizing that this was a kind of test. He pushed his first thoughts aside and looked around.

“No,” he answered. “No, actually, I think you just opened the window because you like the air.”

“I like the scents of the air, especially this time of year,” the great wizard replied, looking toward the open window. “The essence of growth and life comes from the earth now, filling the sky. Even the nonmagicked feel it. They say that ‘love’ is in the air in springtime. It’s close enough to the truth not to matter, but it isn’t love of a man and a woman. It is the love of dirt for root, and leaf for sunlight, and yes, wing for air.”

“But you *wanted* me to believe that you came in through the window, didn’t you?” James said, feeling carefully emboldened.

Merlin smiled slightly and studied James. “Nine-tenths of magic happens in the mind, James Potter. The greatest trick of all is to know what your audience expects to see, and making sure they do.”

James approached another bed and sat on it. “Is this what you came to talk about? Or are you here because you got my message?”

“I have been privy to many things since you last saw me,” the wizard answered. “I have moved in and out, to and fro. I have conversed with many old friends, reacquainted myself with the earth and the beasts and the air. I have met very strange things in the forest, articles of this age, and learned much of the way the world is in this time. I have studied you, yourself, and your people.”

James smiled slowly, realizing something. “You never left us! You vanished from the top of the tower, let us think you flew off with the birds, but you didn’t *go* anywhere, did you? You just turned invisible!”

“You have rather a talent for looking beyond the flat of the mirror, James Potter,” Merlin said, his voice low and his face impassive. “But I will admit that I did hear everything your Professors Franklyn and Longbottom, and the Pendragon, and yes, your father, said about me. I was amused and angered that they presumed to know me so. And yet, I am no slave to arrogance. I asked myself if what they supposed was true. I left then, and I visited my old lands. I went in and out, to and fro. I studied my own deep soul, as Franklyn supposed I should. And I found there was a shadow of truth in their words. A shadow...”

Merlin paused for a long moment. James decided not to say anything, but simply watched the wizard. His face remained utterly immobile, but his eyes were distant. After no less than two minutes, Merlin spoke again.

“But a shadow was not enough to bring me back to the mire of double-speak and confused loyalties that pass for battle-lines in this benighted age. I was far off, exploring, seeking space and land and uninterrupted earth, already sinking into the deep language of the wind and the rain, when there was a new note in the song of the trees. Your message, James Potter.”

James was amazed to see that there was finally emotion on the enormous man’s face. He looked at James nakedly, his eyes suddenly wet. James felt shame for the man’s raw expression of anguish. He even felt a little guilty for his own words, words that had apparently, shockingly, pierced this enormous man’s hidden heart. Then, as if the anguish had never been there, the massive, stony face composed itself. It was not a matter of masking the emotion, James realized. He was simply witnessing the workings of emotion in a man whose culture was utterly alien to him, where the heart was so close to the surface that deep emotion could pass over the face shamelessly and completely, like a cloud obscuring the sun but for a moment.

“Thus, James Potter,” the wizard said, standing slowly, so that he seemed to fill the room. “I return. I am at your service. My soul does indeed require this. I have learned much of this world during my travels this day, and I love little of it, but there is a present evil, even though it is masked with duplicity and etiquette. Perhaps defeating that evil is secondary even to stripping that evil of its façade of respectability.”

James grinned and jumped up as well, not sure whether to shake Merlin’s hand, hug him, or bow. He settled for pumping his fist once in the air and proclaiming, “Yes! Er, thank you, Merlin. Er, Merlinus. Mr. Ambrosius?”

The wizard simply smiled, his ice-blue eyes twinkling.

“So,” James said, “What do we do? I mean, we only have a few hours before Prescott and his crew gather to film the school and everything. I guess I have to explain all that to you. Sheesh, this is going to take a while.”

“I am *Merlin*, James Potter,” the wizard said, sighing. “I have already learned as much as I need to know about this world and how it works. You’d be quite surprised, methinks, to learn how much the trees know of your culture. Mr. Prescott is not your problem. We simply need a council of allies to aid us.”

“All right,” James said, plopping back onto the bed. “What sort of allies do we need?”

Merlin’s eyes narrowed. “We require heroes of wit and cleverness, unafraid to foil convention in order to defend a higher allegiance. Battle skills matter not. What we need at this moment, James Potter, are scoundrels with honour.”

James nodded succinctly. “I know just the group. Scoundrels with honour. Got it.”

“Then let us have at it, my young counselor,” Merlin said, smiling a little frighteningly. “Lead on.”

“So,” James said as he led Merlin down out of the portrait hole. “Do you think we’ll win?”

“Mr. Potter,” Merlin said breezily, stepping out onto the landing and placing his fists on his hips. “You won the moment I decided to join you.”

“Is that the famous Merlin pride talking?” James asked tentatively.

“Like I said,” Merlin replied, turning to follow James with his long, slow stride. “Nine tenths of magic happens in the mind. The last tenth, Mr. Potter, is pure and unadulterated bluster. Take note of that and you’ll do very well.”



After the bright, misty morning, the day progressed into a hazy stillness of unseasonable warmth. Headmistress McGonagall had insisted that classes continue, even during the tour of Martin J. Prescott and

his entourage, but in spite of her order, dozens of students had gathered in the courtyard to witness the arrival of the Muggle reporter's crew. Near the front of the group, James and Harry stood side by side. Only a few feet away, Tabitha Corsica and her Slytherin compatriots were looking decidedly bright-eyed and eager. On the top of the main steps, Headmistress McGonagall was flanked by Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant. Martin Prescott, on the lowest step, glanced at his watch.

"Are you sure they can get their vehicles in through the way you described, Miss Sacarhina?" he said, glancing up to where she stood, squinting in the sunlight. "They will be driving vehicles with *wheels*, as I've said. You know. Wheels. There aren't any magical mud bogs or bridges with trolls living under them or anything, are there?"

Sacarhina was about to answer when the sound of automobile engines became audible in the near distance. Prescott jumped and spun on the spot, craning to catch a glimpse of his crew. James, standing near the front of the crowd of students with his dad, thought headmistress McGonagall was handling herself pretty well, considering everything. She merely pressed her lips tightly together as the huge vehicles rumbled into the courtyard. There were two of them, and James recognized them as the sort of enormous off-road trucks Zane called "Landrovers". The first one ground to a halt directly in front of the steps. All four doors popped open and men began to emerge, blinking in the hazy sunlight and carrying large leather bags covered in thick pockets. Prescott scampered down among the men, calling them by name, pointing and yelling directions.

"I want lights and reflectors on the left side of the steps, angled toward the doors. That's where I'll do my final commentary and conduct interviews. Eddie, you have the chairs? No? All right, that's fine, we'll stand. Sitting might seem too, you know, *established*, anyway. We want to keep the feeling of *exposé* alive the whole time. Which cameras do you have, Vince? I want the thirty-five millimeter handycam on everything. Double film the whole shoot with it, got it? We'll edit the footage in here and there for that hidden-camera feel. Perfect. Where's Greta with the makeup?"

The crew completely ignored the assembly of students and the headmistress and Ministry officials on the steps. All around the trucks was the well-oiled bustle of men assembling cameras, attaching electrical cords to lights, stringing microphones onto long poles, and saying "test" and "check" into smaller microphones meant to be clipped to Prescott's shirt. James noticed a few individuals moving among the group that didn't seem preoccupied with the technical preparations. They were dressed rather better and seemed curious about the castle and the grounds. One of them, an old, balding, friendly-looking man in a light grey suit, ambled up the stairs toward the headmistress.

"Quite the fuss, isn't it?" he proclaimed, glancing back toward the trucks. He bowed slightly toward the headmistress. "Randolph Finney, detective, British Special Police. Not quite retired, but close enough not to matter. Mr. Prescott may have mentioned me? He made rather a big deal of my being here, it seems. Between you and me, I suspect he'd hoped for someone a bit more, er, inspiring, if you take my meaning. So. This is some sort of... school, I understand?"

“Indeed it is, Mr. Finney,” Sacarhina said, stretching out her hand. “My name is Brenda Sacarhina, head of the Department of Ambassadorial relations for the Ministry of Magic. Today is going to be a very interesting day for you, I suspect.”

“Ministry of Magic. How perfectly quaint,” Finney said, shaking Sacarhina’s hand rather distantly. His gaze hadn’t strayed from the headmistress. “And who might you be, Madam?”

“This is-” Sacarhina replied, but McGonagall, long accustomed to overriding unwelcome noises, spoke easily over her.

“Minerva McGonagall, Mr. Finney. Pleased to meet you. I am headmistress of this school.”

“Charmed, charmed!” Finney said, taking McGonagall’s hand reverently and bowing again. “Headmistress McGonagall, I am delighted to meet you.”

“Please, do call me Minerva,” McGonagall said, and James saw just the slightest pained look pass over her face.

“Indeed. And call me Randolph, I insist.” Finney smiled at the headmistress for several seconds, then cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. He turned on the spot, taking in the castle and grounds. “I’d never known there was a school in this area, to tell you the truth. Especially one as magnificent as this. Why, it should be on the register of historic places and no mistake, Minerva. What do you call it?”

Sacarhina began to answer, but nothing came out. She made a tiny noise, coughed a little, and then covered her mouth daintily with one hand, a look of mild puzzlement on her face.

“Hogwarts, Randolph,” McGonagall answered, smiling carefully. “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“You don’t say?” Finney replied, glancing at her. “How wonderfully whimsical.”

“We like to think so.”

“Detective Finney!” Prescott suddenly called, trotting up the steps, his face covered in pancake make-up and tissue paper stuffed into the collar of his shirt. “I see you’ve already met the headmistress. Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant are here to conduct the tour, of course. The headmistress is just along for, er, color, as it were.”

“And she performs her role quite well, doesn’t she?” Finney said, turning back to McGonagall with a grin. James saw that the headmistress was refraining rather heroically from rolling her eyes.

“You have met Miss Sacarhina and Mr. Recreant, then?” Prescott plowed on, moving between Finney and McGonagall. “Miss Sacarhina, perhaps you will tell Detective Finney a bit of what it is you do here?”



Sacrhina smiled charmingly and stepped forward, threading her arm through Finney's in an attempt to lead him away from Headmistress McGonagall.

"..." Sacrhina said. She paused, then closed her mouth and tried to look down at it, which produced a rather odd expression. Finney regarded her with a slightly furrowed brow.

"Are you quite all right, Miss?"

"Miss Sacrhina is feeling just a tad under the weather, Detective Finney," Recreant said, adopting an ingratiating grin that was no match for Sacrhina's practiced smile. "Do allow me. This is a school of magic, as the headmistress has already mentioned. It is, in fact, a school for witches and wizards. We-" Recreant's next word seemed to catch in his throat. He stood with his mouth open, staring at Finney and looking rather like an asphyxiating fish. After a long, awkward moment, he closed his mouth. He tried to smile again, showing far too many large, uneven teeth.

Finney's brow was still furrowed. He disengaged from Sacrhina's arm and glanced between both her and Recreant. "Yes? Spit it out, then, why don't you? Are you *both* ill?"

Prescott was very nearly hopping from foot to foot. "Perhaps we should just begin the tour, then, shall we? Of course, I know my way around the castle a bit now. We can begin as soon as... as soon as..." He realized he still had tissues jammed into the collar of his shirt. He grabbed at them and stuffed them into his pants pockets. "Miss Sacrhina, you had mentioned that there would be someone else? An expert in explaining things to the uninitiated? Perhaps now would be a good time to introduce this person?"

Sacrhina craned her head forward, her eyes bulging very slightly and her mouth open. After a few seconds of strained silence, the headmistress cleared her throat and gestured toward the open courtyard. "Here he is now, I suspect. You know how Mr. Hubert tends to be rather late sometimes. Poor man will forget his own head one of these days. Still, he is a genius in his own way, isn't he Brenda?"

Her mouth still open, Sacrhina turned to follow McGonagall's pointing hand. At the opening of the courtyard, another vehicle was entering. It was ancient, its engine choppy and puttering a pall of blue smoke. Finney frowned a little as it chugged slowly across the courtyard. Sacrhina and Recreant stared at the vehicle with twin expressions of pure bewilderment and disgust. The crowd of students gathered near the steps moved back as the vehicle squeaked to a stop in front of the first Landrover, pointing at it. The engine coughed, sputtered, and then died, slowly.

"That's a Ford Anglia, isn't it?" Finney said. "I haven't seen one of those in decades! I'm amazed it still runs."

"Oh, our Mr. Hubert is very good with engines, Randolph," McGonagall said crisply. "Why he's almost a wizard, really."

The driver's door squeaked open and a figure clambered up out of it. He was very large, so that the car rose perceptibly on its springs as he arose from it. The man squinted at the stairs, smiling a little vacantly.



He had long, silvery blonde hair and a matching beard, both of which were offset by a gigantic pair of black, horn-rimmed glasses. The man's hair was pulled back in a natty, almost prim pony-tail.

"Mr. Terrence Hubert," McGonagall said, introducing the man. "Chancellor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Welcome, sir. Do come and meet our guests."

Mr. Hubert smiled and then glanced aside as the passenger's door of the Anglia screeched open.

"I hope you don't mind, everybody." Mr. Hubert said, adjusting his glasses. "I've brought my wife along with me. Say hello to the folks, dear."

James gasped as Madame Delacroix climbed awkwardly out of the car. She smiled very slowly and deliberately. "Hello," she said in a strangely monotone voice.

Hubert grinned mistily at her. "She's a dearie, isn't she? Well, shall we begin, then?"

Sacarhina coughed, her eyes widening rather alarmingly as she watched Delacroix join Mr. Hubert in front of the Anglia. She nudged Recreant with her elbow, but he was as mute as she was.

"Chancellor?" Prescott said, looking back and forth between Hubert and McGonagall. "There's no chancellor! Since when is there a chancellor?"

"I do apologize, sir," Hubert said, climbing the steps with Delacroix by his side. She grinned a bit wildly. "I've been away for the past week. Business in Montreal, Canada, of all places. Wonderful little distribution warehouse there. You know, we only use the highest quality magical supplies here, of course. I inspect all our materials by hand before ordering anything. Oh, but I shouldn't say any more, of course. Heh, heh!" Hubert tapped the side of his nose with an index finger, grinning conspiratorially at Prescott.

Prescott's face was tight with suspicion. He stared at Hubert, then at Madame Delacroix. Finally, he held up his hands and closed his eyes. "All right, who cares. Mr. Hubert, if you are our guide, then guide away." He threw a glance over his shoulder at the camera crew, gesturing wildly with his eyebrows, and then followed Hubert into the gigantic open doors. "Chancellor Hubert, can you tell us and our audience what you do here at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

"Why of course," Hubert said, turning as he reached the center of the entrance hall. "We teach magic! We are, in fact, Europe's premiere school of the magical arts." Hubert seemed to notice the camera for the first time. He grinned a little nervously into it. "Students, er, come from the farthest reaches of the continent, and even beyond, to learn the ancient arts of the mystical masters of the craft. To acquire, to absorb, to, er, steep, as it were, in the secret arts of divination, illumination, prestidigitation, and, er, etcetera, etcetera."

Prescott was staring very hard at Hubert, his cheeks reddening. "I see. Yes, so you admit that you teach *actual magic* within these walls?"

“Why, certainly, young man. Why ever would I deny it?”

“Then you do not deny,” Prescott said in a pouncing sort of voice, “that these paintings, which line this very room, are magical, *moving* paintings?” He gestured grandly toward the walls. The cameraman spun and walked as quickly and smoothly as he could toward a group of paintings by the doorway. The boom microphone operator lowered his apparatus, so as to be sure to capture Hubert’s response.

“M-moving paintings?” Hubert said in a distracted voice. “Oh. O-ho yes. Well, I suspect they could be said to move. Why that painting there, no matter where you are in the room, the eyes in the painting are always upon you.” Hubert raised his hands mysteriously, warming to the subject. “They seem, in fact, to follow you *everywhere you go!*”

The cameraman took his eye away from the viewfinder and frowned back at Prescott. Prescott’s face darkened. “That’s not what I mean. Make them move! You know they can! You!” He spun on his heels and pointed at McGonagall. “You had a conversation with a portrait in your office just yesterday! I watched you! I heard the painting talk!”

McGonagall made a face that was so comically surprised that James, who was standing just inside the doorway with the rest of the assembled students, had to suppress a giggle. “I can’t imagine what you mean, sir,” the headmistress replied.

“Here, now, you leave the lady out of this, why don’t you,” Finney said archly, taking half a step in front of the headmistress, who was a full head taller than him. “Just you conduct your almighty investigation, Prescott, and let’s get this over with.”

Prescott boggled for a few seconds, and then composed himself. “Ooookay. Forget the moving paintings. Silly me.” He turned back to Hubert. “I presume class is currently in session, Mr. Hubert?”

“Hm?” Hubert said, as if startled. “In session? Well, I... I guess so. I wouldn’t expect-”

“You wouldn’t expect we’d like to see, would you?” Prescott interrupted. “Well we would. Our viewers have a right to know exactly what is going on here, right... under... our... noses.”

“Viewers?” Hubert repeated, glancing back to the camera. “This is, er, *live*? Is it?”

Prescott dropped his head forward and slumped a bit. “No, Mr. Hubert. It isn’t. Didn’t any of you tell him how this works? We record it, we edit it, we broadcast it. Miss Sacarhina, you understood all of this, am I correct?” He glanced aside at Sacarhina, who smiled and spread her arms. She mouthed a few words, and then gestured vaguely at her throat. Recreant cinched his grin a notch higher. His forehead was beaded with sweat. “Great,” Prescott muttered. “I see. Marvelous. Continuing.” He straightened and glared at Hubert again. “Yes, our viewers would very much like to see what happens in these so-called ‘classrooms’, Mr. Chancellor. Please lead the way.”

Hubert turned to Delacroix. “What do you think, dear? Divination or Levitation?”

“Dey are both equally impressive. Honey,” Delacroix said, forming the words rather awkwardly. She seemed to want to say more, but despite the workings of her jaw, her lips clamped tightly shut.

“My wife is foreign, as you can see,” Hubert said apologetically. “But she does her best.”

“The classrooms, please, Mr. Hubert,” Prescott insisted. “You can’t keep the press out, sir.”

“No, no, of course not. We appreciate the publicity, in fact,” Hubert said, turning to lead the crew down a hall. “Prestigious as we are, sometimes it’s hard to keep our heads above water. Magic is a, er, *specialized* study, to say the least. Only a certain kind of individual has the patience and grace to learn it. Ah, here we are then. Divination.”

Prescott walked briskly into the open doorway of the classroom, followed by his camera crew and boom microphone operator, scrambling to keep up with him. Finney remained near the back of the group, staying as close to headmistress McGonagall as he could. Harry and James, at the head of the crowd of curious students, leaned in through the door to watch.

“Here, our students learn the ancient art of predicting the future,” Hubert said grandly. A dozen students were scattered around the room, staring grimly down at the objects on the desks in front of them. At the head of the class, as if on cue, Professor Trelawney raised her arms, producing a musical jingling from the assortment of bangles on her wrists.

“Seek, students!” she cried in her mistiest voice. “Stare deep, deep into the face of the all-knowing cosmos, represented in the swirling patterns and designs of the infinite! Find your destinies!”

“Tea leaves!” Finney said happily. “My own Mam used to read fortunes in tea leaves for the tourists! Got us through some hard times, back in the day. How perfectly picturesque, keeping such traditions alive.”

“Traditions’, pah!” Trelawney said, arising from her seat and swirling her gauzy robes dramatically. “We find the embedded nature of perfect truth in the leaves, sir. Past, present, future, all bound together for those who bear the eyes to see!”

“That’s just what my Mam used to say, too!” chuckled Finney.

“This is how you tell the future?” Prescott said, staring disgustedly into one of the students’ cups. “This is ridiculous. Where’re the crystal balls? Where’s the swirling smoke and the ghostly visions?”

“Well, er, we have those things, too, Mr. Prescott,” Hubert said. “Don’t we dear?”

“Advanced Divination. Second semester. Two hundred Euro lab fee,” Delacroix replied mechanically.

“Covers the crystal balls,” Hubert said behind his raised hand. “Those things aren’t cheap. We have them special made in China. Real crystal and everything. Of course the students get to take them home at the end of the school year. They’re kind of a memento.”

"I believe you mentioned levitation!" Prescott said, marching out of the room. His entourage followed swiftly, clanking and unrolling more electrical cord.

"Certainly, yes. A staple of the magical arts," Hubert replied, following Prescott across the hall and into another classroom. "We combine that class with basic prestidigitation. Yes, right in here."

Zane stood in the center of the classroom with a wand in his hand. A few dozen other students sat along the wall, watching in amazement as the bust of Godric Gryffindor floated and bobbed around the room, apparently at the behest of Zane's waving wand. There was a gasp and sigh of amazement from Prescott's crew. The cameraman squatted slowly, zooming in on the action.

"Ah ha!" Prescott said excitedly. "Real magic! Being performed by children!"

"Just as promised," Hubert said proudly. "Mr. Walker here is among the best in his class. Mr. Walker, what year are you, by the way?"

"First year, sir," Zane said, grinning happily.

"Excellent form, my boy," Hubert replied. "Try a loop, why don't you?"

The students applauded politely as the bust raised and spun slowly in the air. Then, suddenly, it dropped, falling onto a mattress which had been placed in the center of the floor.

"Oh, too bad, Mr. Walker. So close," Hubert chided.

"It wasn't my fault!" Zane yelled. "It was my backstage! Ted, you dolt, you yanked when you were supposed to swoop! How many times do I have to explain that!"

"Hey!" Ted objected, bursting noisily out of a closet at the rear of the room. He held a handful of wires in his hand, all of which snaked up to a series of pulleys attached to the ceiling of the closet. "You want to try coming back here and working these controls in the dark? Huh? Besides, Noah is the one to blame. He was slow with the cross pulley."

A voice from the depths of the closet yelled angrily, "What? That's it! I want to be on stage next time. I've had it with this 'assistant' role. I want to wear the hat!"

"Nobody's wearing the hat, Noah," Zane said, rolling his eyes.

"Well *somebody* needs to wear the hat!" Noah cried, his face appearing around the doorway of the closet. "How does anybody know who's the magician and who's the assistant?"

"Boys, boys," Hubert placated, raising his hands. "We only have one hat per classroom, and Miss Morganstern is using it to practice the rabbit trick. Mr. Prescott, Mr. Finney, would you like to see the rabbit trick?"

"Why, yes," Finney said brightly.

“No!” Prescott yelled.

Tabitha Corsica had pushed herself to the front of the students crowding the doorway. Her face was red with anger. “Mr. Prescott,” she began. “You-“

Hubert turned slowly to face Tabitha. “This is hardly the time for autographs, Miss Corsica.”

“I’m not here to get his autograph, ‘*Chancellor*’...” Tabitha spat, raising her arm to point at Hubert. There was a small notebook and a pen clutched in her hand. She stopped in mid-sentence, staring at the two items. The cover of the notebook was pink and had the word *autographs* printed on it in white script.

“There will be plenty of time later for such things, Miss Corsica. But I’m sure Mr. Prescott is flattered by your, er, interest.”

“Chancellor Hubert?” Petra interjected, peering into a black top hat which was sitting atop a ridiculously glittery table. “I think something might be wrong with Mr. Wiffles. Do rabbits usually lie on their backs like that?”

“Not now, Miss Morganstern,” Hubert said, flapping his hand dismissively. “Mr. Prescott, I believe you wanted to see our sawing-in-half room?”

But Prescott was gone, stalking past the suddenly silent Tabitha Corsica and heading down the corridor behind her. The crew scrambled to chase him as he poked his head into each room. At the end of the hall, he gave a muffled shout of triumph and waved for his crew to join him in the furthest classroom.

“Here!” Prescott yelled, gesturing wildly with his right arm. The crowd poured into the room, followed by the watching students, who were beginning to grin. “Right before your eyes! A *ghost professor*! Make sure you get plenty of footage of this, Vince! Proof of the afterlife!”

There was no gasp of surprise this time. Vince moved in close, focusing carefully with one hand.

“Ah, yes. Professor Binns,” Hubert said happily. “Say hello to the nice folks.”

Professor Binns blinked owlshly and passed his gaze over the crowd. “Greetings,” he said in his thin, distant voice.

“It’s just a projection on smoke,” Vince, the cameraman, announced.

“Well,” Hubert said, a bit defensively. “He’s not meant to be seen quite so close to like that. The students are usually well back from him. Creates a nice sense of mystery and the supernatural, really.”

Ralph was among the students seated in the classroom. He addressed the cameraman with a note of annoyance. “You’re ruining the effect, you know. You don’t have to go and spoil it for everybody.”

“Greetings,” Binns said again, passing his gaze over the crowd.

“Impossible!” Prescott shouted angrily, striding toward the front of the room. “It’s a ghost! I know it is!”

“It’s a projection, Martin,” Vince said, lowering the camera. “I’ve seen these before. It’s not even a very good one. You can hear the projector running. It’s right there, under the desk. And see here? Dry ice machine. Makes the smoke.”

Finney cleared his throat near the door. “This is getting rather embarrassing, Mr. Prescott.”

“Greetings,” said professor Binns.

Prescott turned wildly. He was obviously coming rather unraveled. “No!” he shouted. “This is all a setup! It’s *his* fault! He’s trying to trick all of you!” He pointed at Hubert.

“Well, that is what we do here,” Hubert said, smiling politely. “We’re in the business of tricks. Although we prefer the term ‘illusion’, if you don’t mind.”

“It’s maaaaa-gic,” Delacroix suddenly said, a bit inanely. She gave a ghastly grin.

“I see what you’re all trying to do here,” Prescott said, still pointing at Hubert, and then McGonagall and even Sacarhina and Recreant, who shook their heads vigorously. “You’re trying to make me look like a madman! Well, my public knows me better than that, and so do my associates. You can’t hide everything! What about the moving staircases? Or the giants? Hmm? Or...” Prescott stopped, his finger still in mid-point. His eyes went unfocussed for a moment, and then he grinned maliciously. “I know just the thing. Just the thing indeed. Vince, Eddie, the rest of you, come with me.”

Hubert followed as the crew clanked and jostled through the crowd of students. “Where are you going, Mr. Prescott? I’m your guide, if you recall. I’ll show you whatever you wish.”

“Yes?” Prescott said, spinning back toward Hubert. The curious students had parted for him and his crew, so that Prescott glared back between them, glancing from side to side. “Will you show me-“ he paused dramatically and tilted his head up, “-the Garage?”

“The...” Hubert began. He blinked, and then looked aside at Professor McGonagall. James suddenly felt Harry’s hand tighten on his shoulder. Something was wrong. “The... Garage?” Hubert repeated, as if he was unfamiliar with the word.

Prescott’s grin grew predatory. “Aha! Weren’t prepared for that, were you? Yes, I had myself a good long look around the grounds while you were all busy this morning. Peeked here and there and got quite an eyeful! There is a Garage,” he said, turning to face the camera, “that penetrates the very fabric of space and time, creating a magical portal between this place and another place thousands of kilometers away! America, if I may be so bold as to guess! I have seen it myself. I have been inside the structure, and smelled the air of that far off place. I have seen the sunrise of that land, while the sun here was high above the horizon. It was no trick, no illusion. These people would have us believe that they are mere tricksters, while I maintain, as I

have witnessed with my own eyes, that they are dabblers in a form of magic that is purely and simply supernatural. Now, I will prove it!" With a flourish, Prescott turned and marched away, heading back to the Entrance Hall. Harry fell in line next to Hubert, but couldn't get his attention.

"Mr. Prescott!" Hubert yelled over the sound of the now agitated crowd. "I really must insist that you allow me... Mr. Prescott! This is highly irregular!"

Prescott led his crew out of the main entrance and across the courtyard. The crowd of students had grown considerably, and the noise of their passage had become quite loud. Everyone had seen the exterior of the Alma Aleron's Garage, but very few had been inside or seen what it housed. The babble of worry and curiosity was a dull roar.

"This could be bad, James," Harry said, keeping his voice below the noise of the crowd.

"What can we do?"

Harry merely shook his head, watching Prescott turn the corner, leading the group toward the canvas structure overlooking the lake. He turned, framing himself before its canvas walls. His crew arranged themselves in position, lowering the boom microphone over him and adjusting huge white umbrellas to reflect the sunlight on his shadowed side. Prescott turned slightly, showing his best side to the camera as Vince squatted slowly, focusing. It was, James had to admit, a very dramatic moment.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Prescott began, raising his natural orator's voice. "My crew and I, and all of you, have been the victims of an elaborate hoax. This is no simple school of sleight of hand and card tricks. No, I have witnessed within these walls true magic of the most astounding and blood-chilling variety. I have seen ghosts and watched actual levitations. I have observed doors appearing magically in otherwise solid stone walls. I have seen beasts and giants that boggle the mind. Today, we have been played for fools, deceived by a pack of wizards and witches- yes, actual magical people- who believe they can fool us with parlor tricks. But now I will reveal the truth of this place. Behind this canvas is a form of uncanny magic that will shock and astound you. When this truth is revealed, Mr. Rudolph Finney, detective for the British Special Police, will be inclined to launch a full scale, official investigation into this establishment, with the help of police agencies from all across Europe. After today, ladies and gentlemen, our lives will never be the same again. After today, we will be living in a world where we know, without a doubt, that witches and wizards are real, and that they walk among us."

Prescott paused, letting his words echo over the stunned crowd. Then he turned toward the area where McGonagall, Hubert, Sacarhina and Reccant were gathered. Finney stood next to the headmistress, frowning slightly, his eyes wide. "Mr. Hubert," Prescott called out, "Will you open these doors for us? This is your last chance to do the right thing."

Hubert's expression was grave. He stared very directly at Prescott. "I have to advise you against this course of action, Mr. Prescott."



“You open it or I will.”

“You’ll ruin everything, sir,” Hubert said. Next to him, Delacroix was grinning even more manically.

“I’ll ruin nothing but your secret, Mr. Hubert. The world needs to know what is behind those canvas doors.”

Hubert seemed frozen in place. It looked as if he wasn’t going to do it. And then, he moved forward, lowering his head. There was a long, collective gasp from the crowd. Prescott stepped aside, glancing triumphantly at the camera as he did so. Hubert approached the tent and stood in front of it. He sighed deeply, and then reached up, grasping the knotted strips of canvas that held the tent’s wide flaps closed. He turned his head to look at Prescott. After a terrible pause, he pulled. The knot came undone and the flaps dropped open, unfurling like flags, slapping the poles at either side of the broad tent opening. The crowd gasped, and then there was a long, puzzled silence.

James peered in. He couldn’t immediately make out what it was. The inside of the tent was rather dark, but he could see that the flying vehicles were gone. Most of the tent’s interior was obscured by a large, oblong shape. A few people near the front of the crowd began to giggle, and then a wave of laughter washed over the crowd.

“Well, you’ve done it,” Hubert said, still staring at Prescott. “You’ve ruined the secret. And this was meant to be our big finish. I have to say, sir, you are no fun at all.” Hubert finally stepped back, getting out of the way of the tent so that the camera crew could see directly inside. Tiny, colored Christmas lights flashed in sequence around the huge, papier-mâché flying saucer. Black letters were painted on the side, clearly visible in the flashing lights.

“And I hate to say it, Mr. Lupin,” Hubert said, turning to Ted. “But you misspelled ‘rocket’. How dreadfully embarrassing.”