



13: REVELATION OF THE ROBE

That evening after dinner, the three boys ran up to the Gryffindor sleeping quarters again, pausing only when James noticed the staring woman in the background of a painting of some maidens milking a pair of ridiculously plump cows. He berated the tall and ugly woman, who was dressed like a nun, demanding to know what she was looking at. After half a minute, Zane and Ralph got impatient and each grabbed one of James' elbows, dragging him away. In the sleeping quarters, they clustered around James' trunk while James unlocked it and pulled out Jackson's case. He set it on the edge of his bed and the three of them stared at it.

"Do we have to open it?" Ralph asked.

James nodded. "We have to know we have the robe, don't we? It's been driving me crazy all day. What if I was wrong and the thing in there is just some of Jackson's laundry? I can't help thinking that he's the sort that'd carry around a totally meaningless briefcase just to get people talking about it. You should've seen how he was this morning when he thought he'd caught Zane and me. He was right mad."

Zane plopped onto the bed. "What if we can't even open it?"

“Can’t be that much of a lock if it popped open that day in D.A.D.A.” James reasoned.

Ralph stood back, giving James room. “Let’s get it over with then. Try and open it.”

James approached the case and tried the lock. He’d expected it not to work and was prepared to try the assortment of opening and unlocking spells the three had collected. Instead, the brass catch on top of the case popped open easily. So easily, in fact, that James was momentarily sure it had clicked open a split second before he’d actually touched it. He froze, but neither of the other two boys seemed to have noticed.

“Well?” Ralph whispered. Zane leaned over the case. The mouth of it had come open slightly.

“Can’t see anything in there,” Zane said. “It’s too dark. Open the rotten thing, James. It’s yours more than either of ours.”

James touched the case, grasped the handles and used them to pull it open. He could see the folds of black cloth. A vague, musty smell wafted from the open case. James thought it smelled like the inside of a jack o’lantern a week after Halloween. He remembered Luna saying that the robe had once been used to cover the body of a dead king, and he shuddered.

Zane’s voice was low and slightly hoarse. “Is that it? I can’t tell what it is.”

“Don’t,” Ralph warned, but James had already reached into the case. He pulled the robe out. The cloth unfolded smoothly, spotlessly black and clean. There seemed to be acres of it. Ralph backed further away as James let the robe pool on the floor at his feet. The last of it came out of the case and James realized he was holding the hood of it. It was a large hood, with golden braids at the throat.

Zane nodded, his face pale and serious. “That’s it, no doubt. What are we gonna do with it?”

“Nothing.” Ralph answered firmly. “Stick it back in the case, James. That thing’s scary. You can feel the magic of it, can’t you? I bet Jackson put some kind of shield charm or something on the case to contain it. Otherwise, somebody would’ve felt it. Go on, put it away. I don’t want to touch it.”

“Hold on,” James said vaguely. He could indeed feel the magic of the cloak, just as Ralph had said, but it didn’t feel scary. It was powerful, but curious. The smell of the robe had changed as James pulled it out. What had at first smelled faintly rotten now smelled merely earthy, like fallen leaves and wet moss, wild, even exciting. Holding the robe in his hands, James had the most unusual sensation. It was as if he could feel, in the deepest pit of his being, the very air in the room, filling the space like water, streaming through cracks in the frame of the window, cold, like ice-blue vapor. The sensation expanded and he sensed the wind moving around the turret that housed the sleeping quarters. It was alive, swirling over the conical roof, channeling into missing shingles and exposed rafters. James faintly remembered children’s stories about how Merlin was a master of nature, how he felt it and used it, and how it obeyed his whims. James knew he was tapping into that power somehow, as if it was embedded in the very fabric of the relic robe. The sensation grew and spiraled. Now, James felt the creatures of the deepening evening: the pattering heartbeats of mice in the attics, the blood-purple world of the bats in the forest, the dreaming haze of a hibernating bear, even the

dormant life of the trees and grass, their roots like hands clutched in the earth, clinging to life in the dead of winter.

James knew what he was doing, but didn't seem to be operating his own arms. He raised the hood, turning himself into it. The robe slid over his shoulders, and just as the hood settled over his head, hiding his eyes, James heard the alarmed and warning cries of Zane and Ralph. They were fading, as if down a long, sleepy tunnel. They were gone.

He was walking. Leaves crunched under his feet, which were large and shoeless, tough with calluses. He breathed in, filling his lungs, and his chest expanded like a barrel. Big, he was. Tall, with muscled arms that felt like coiled pythons and legs as thick and sturdy as tree trunks. The earth was quiet around him, but alive. He felt it through the soles of his feet when he walked. The vibrance of the forest streamed into him, strengthening him. But there was less of it than there should be. The world had changed, and was still changing. It was being tamed, losing its feral wildness and strength. Alongside it, his power was dimming as well. He was still unmatched, but there were blind spots in his communion with the earth, and those blind spots were growing, shutting him off bit by bit, reducing him. The realms of men were expanding, scouring the earth, parsing it into meaningless plots and fields, breaking up the magic polarities of the wilderness. It angered him. He had moved among the growing kingdoms of men, advised and assisted them, always for a price, but he hadn't foreseen this result. His magical brothers and sisters were no help. Their magic was different than his. That which made him so powerful, his connection to the earth, was also becoming his only weakness. In a cold rage, he walked. As he passed, the trees spoke to him, but even the woodsy voices of the naiads and the dryads was dimming. Their echo was confused and broken, divided.

Ahead of him, revealed only in the moonlight, a clearing opened, surrounding a stony depression in the earth. He descended into the center of the depression and looked up. The glittering night sky poured into the bowl-shaped clearing, painting everything bone white. His shadow pooled beneath him as if it were noonday. There was no place for him in this world anymore. He would leave the society of men. But he would return when things were different, when circumstances had changed, when the world was again ripe for his power. Then, he would reawaken the earth, revive the trees and their spirits, refresh their power, and his with it. Then would be a time of reckoning. It might be decades or even centuries. It might even be eternity. It didn't matter. He could stay in this time no longer.

There was a noise, a scuffle of clumsy footsteps nearby. Someone else was there, in the clearing with him; someone he hated, but whom he needed. He spoke to this person, and as he did, the world began to dim, to darken, to fade.

"Instruct those that follow. Keep my vestments, station and talisman at the ready. I will await. At the Hall of Elders' Crossing, when my time of returning is come, assemble them again and I will know. I have chosen you to safeguard this mission, Austramaddux, for as my last apprentice your soul is in my hand. You are bound to this task until it is complete. Vow to me your oath."

Out of the descending darkness, the voice spoke only once. "It is my will and my honor, Master."

There was no answer. He was gone. His robes dropped to the earth, empty. His staff balanced for a moment, then fell forward and was caught in an eerily white hand, the hand of Austramaddux, before it could hit the rocky ground. Then, even that scene vanished. The darkness compressed to a dwindling point. The universe leapt up, monstrous and spinning, and there was only oblivion.

James forced his eyes open and gasped. His lungs felt flattened, as if he hadn't had breath in them for several minutes. Hands grasped him, yanking the hood back and pulling the robe off his shoulders. Weakness stole over James and he began to collapse. Zane and Ralph caught him awkwardly and heaved him onto his bed.

"What happened?" James asked, still dragging in great gulps of air.

"You tell us!" Ralph said, his voice high and frightened.

Zane was stuffing the robe roughly back into the briefcase. "You put this crazy thing on and then, pop! Off you went. Not what I'd have called a wise choice, you know."

"I blacked out?" James asked, recovering enough to get his elbows beneath him.

Ralph said, "Blacked out nothing. You up and disappeared. Poof."

"It's true," Zane nodded, seeing James' stunned expression. "You were clean gone for three or four minutes. Then *he* showed up," Zane indicated the corner behind James' bed with a worried nod. James turned and there was the semi-transparent form of Cedric Diggory. The ghost looked down at him, then smiled and shrugged. Cedric seemed rather more solid than the last few times James had seen him.

Zane went on, "He just appeared through the wall, as if he had come looking for you. Ralph here shrieked like- well, I'd say like he'd just seen a ghost, but considering we have breakfast with ghosts most mornings and a history class with one every Tuesday, the phrase doesn't seem all that impressive anymore."

Ralph spoke up. "He took one look at us, then the briefcase, and then he just, sort of, *thinned out*. Next thing we know, you're back, just where'd you been, looking white as a statue."

James turned back to the ghost of Cedric. "What did you do?"

Cedric opened his mouth to speak, tentatively and carefully. As if from a long way off, his voice seeped into the room. James couldn't tell if he was hearing it with his ears or his mind.

You were in danger. I was sent. I saw what was happening when I got here.

"What was it?" James asked. The experience was murky in his memory, but he sensed he'd remember more when the magic of it wore off.

A Threshold Marker. A powerful bit of magic. It opens a dimensional gateway, designed to communicate a message or a secret over great time or distance. But its strength is careless. It almost swallowed you up.

James knew that was true. He had felt it. In the end, the darkness had been consuming, seamless. He swallowed past a hard lump in his throat and asked, "How did I get back?"

I found you, Cedric said simply. I dipped into the ether, where I have spent so much time since my death. You were there, but you were far off. You were going. I chased you and returned with you.

"Cedric," James said, feeling stupid for putting on the robe, and terrified at what had almost happened. "Thanks for bringing me back."

I owed you that. I owed your father that. He brought me back, once.

"Hey," James said suddenly, brightening. "You can talk now!"

Cedric smiled, and it was the first genuine smile James had seen on the ghostly face. *I feel... different. Stronger. More... here, somehow.*

"Wait," Ralph said, raising a hand. "This is the ghost you told us about, isn't it? The one that chased the intruder off the grounds a few months ago?"

"Oh, yeah," James said. "Zane and Ralph, this is Cedric Diggory. Cedric, these are my friends. So what do you think is happening to you? What's making you more here?"

Cedric shrugged again. *For what seemed like a long time, I felt like I was in a sort of dream. I moved through the castle, but it was empty. I never got hungry, or thirsty, or cold, or needed to rest. I knew I was dead, but that was all. Everything was dark and silent, and there didn't seem to be any days or seasons. No passage of time at all. Then, things began to happen.*

Cedric turned and sat on the bed, making no mark on the blankets. James, who was closest, could feel a distinct chill emanating from Cedric's form. The ghost continued.

For periods of time, I started to feel more aware. I began to see people in the halls, but they were like smoke. I couldn't hear them. I came to realize that these periods of activity happened in the hours of the day right after my time of death. Each night I'd feel myself awaken. I noticed the time, because that was the thing that meant the most, the sense of minutes and hours passing. I searched out a clock, the one just outside the Great Hall, and watched the time go by. I was most awake throughout the night, but by each morning, I'd begin to fade. Then, one morning, just as I was thinning, losing touch, I saw him.

James sat up straight. "The intruder?"

Cedric nodded. *I knew he wasn't supposed to be here, and somehow I knew that if I tried I could make him see me. I scared him away.*

Cedric grinned again, and James thought he could see in that grin the strong and likeable boy that his dad had known.

“But he came back,” James said. Cedric’s grin turned into a scowl of frustration.

He came back, yes. I saw him, and I scared him off again. I started to watch for him in the mornings. And then, one night he broke in through a window. I was stronger then, but I decided someone else needed to know he was inside the castle. So I came to you, James. You had seen me, and I knew who you were. I knew you’d help.

“That was the night you broke the stained-glass window,” Zane said, smiling. “Kicked that guy through it like Bruce Lee. Nice.”

“Who was he?” James asked, but Cedric merely shook his head. He didn’t know.

“So it’s almost seven o’clock, now,” Ralph pointed out. “How are you making us see you? Isn’t this your weakest time?”

Cedric seemed to think about it. *I’m getting more solid. I’m still just a ghost, but I seem to be becoming, sort of, more of a ghost. I can talk more now. And there is less and less of that strange nothing time. I think that this is just how ghosts are made.*

“But why?” James couldn’t help asking. “What makes a ghost happen? Why didn’t you just, you know, move on?”

Cedric looked at him closely, and James sensed that Cedric himself didn’t know the answer to that question, or at least, not very clearly. He shook his head slightly. *I wasn’t done yet. I had so much to live for. It happened so fast, so suddenly. I just... wasn’t done.*

Ralph picked up Professor Jackson’s case and threw it back into James’ trunk. “So, where did you go when you popped off, James?” he said, heaving himself onto the end of the bed.

James took a deep breath, collecting his memories of the strange journey. He described the initial feeling of holding the cloak, how it seemed to allow him to sense the air and the wind, then even the animals and the trees. Then he told them about the vision he’d had, of being inside Merlin’s body, in his very thoughts. He shuddered, remembering the anger and bitterness, and the voice of the servant, Austramaddux, who vowed his oath to serve until the time of reckoning was come. He recalled it vividly as he spoke, finishing by describing how the blackness of the night had wrapped around him like a cocoon, shrinking and turning to nothingness.

Zane listened with intense interest. “It makes sense,” he finally said in a low, awed voice.

“What?” James asked.

“How Merlin might’ve done it. Don’t you see? Professor Jackson himself talked about it on our first day of class!” He was getting excited. His eyes were wide, darting from James to Ralph to the ghost of Cedric, who was still seated on the edge of the bed.

Ralph shook his head. “I don’t get it. I don’t have Technomancy this year.”

“Merlin didn’t die,” Zane said emphatically. “He disappeared!”

James was puzzled. “That doesn’t make sense. Any wizard can disappear. What’s so special about that?”

“Remember what Jackson told us that first day? Disapparation is instantaneous for the wizard whose doing it, even though it takes a little time for the wizard’s bits to fly apart then reassemble at a new place. If a wizard disappears without determining his new center-point, he never reappears at all, right? He just stays stuck in nothingness forever!”

“Well, sure,” James agreed, remembering the lecture but failing to see the point.

Zane was nearly vibrating with excitement. “Merlin didn’t disappear to a *place*,” he said meaningfully. “He disappeared to a *time* and a *set of circumstances*!”

Ralph and James boggled, considering the implications. Zane went on. “At the end of your vision, you said Merlin told Austramaddux to keep the relics and to watch for the time to be right. Then, when the time came, the relics were supposed to be gathered again at the Hall of Elder’s Crossing. You see? Merlin was setting up the time and circumstances for his reapparation. What you described at the very end, James, was Merlin disappearing into oblivion.” Zane paused, thinking hard. “All these centuries, he’s just been suspended in time, stuck in everywhere-ness, waiting for the right circumstances for his reapparation. To him, no time has passed at all!”

Ralph looked at the trunk at the end of James’ bed. “Then it’s for real,” he said. “They could actually do it. They could bring him back.”

“Not anymore,” James said, smiling mirthlessly. “We’ve got the robe. Without all the relics, the circumstances won’t be right. They can’t do anything.”

As soon as James had heard Zane explain it, it made perfect sense, especially in the context of the Threshold Marker vision. Suddenly, his possession of the robe had become even more important, and he couldn’t help wondering at the remarkable series of lucky circumstances that’d led to them obtaining it. From the briefcase Ralph had discovered in just the nick of time, to Zane’s remarkably effective visum-ineptio charm, James had the strongest sense that he, Zane and Ralph were being guided in their goal of thwarting the Merlin plot. But who was helping them?

“By the way,” James said to the ghost of Cedric, once Ralph and Zane had fallen into an animated discussion about Merlin’s disappearance. “You said you were sent to help me. Who sent you?”

Cedric had stood and was fading a bit, but not much. He smiled at James and said, *Someone I’m not supposed to mention, although I think you can probably guess. Someone who’s been watching.*

Snape, thought James. The portrait of Snape had sent Cedric to help him when he’d gotten sucked into the Threshold Marker. But how had he known? James thought about that for a long time after Zane

and Ralph had headed back to their own rooms, long after the rest of the Gryffindors had climbed the stairs and plopped into their beds. No answer came that night, however, and eventually James slept.



For the next several days, the three boys went about their normal school activities in a sort of triumphant fog. James left Jackson's bag, with the relic robe inside, locked in his trunk and protected with Zane's locking spell. Considering the effectiveness of the visum-ineptio charm on the fake case, they had no serious concerns that anyone would even be looking for the real briefcase. Jackson continued to carry the old red rock-hound bag with the Hiram & Blattwott's label on it to classes and meals, with no indication that he thought anything was out of the ordinary. Further, no one else spared it a second glance, even though Jackson had been seen carrying the black case with his name plate on the side for months. Finally, on Saturday afternoon, James, Ralph and Zane met in the Gryffindor common room to discuss their next steps.

"There're really only two questions, now," Zane said, leaning over the table upon which they were ostensibly doing their homework. "Where is the Hall of Elder's Crossing? And where is the third relic, Merlin's staff?"

James nodded. "I've been thinking about that last one. The throne is under the guard of Madame Delacroix. The robe was under the guard of Professor Jackson. The third relic must be under the guard of the third conspirator. My guess is it's somebody else here on the grounds, an inside person. What if it's the Slytherin who used the name Austramaddux on Ralph's GameDeck? They'd have to be aware of the plot if they used that name, and if they are aware of it, they're in on it."

"But who?" Ralph asked. "I didn't see who took it. It was just gone. Besides, the staff of Merlin would be pretty hard to hide, wouldn't it? If he was as big as you said he was in your vision, James, then the thing must be six feet tall if it's an inch. How do you hide a six foot magical lightning rod like that?"

James shook his head. "I haven't the foggiest. Still, it's up to you to keep a look out, Ralph. Like Ted said, you're our inside man."

Ralph slumped. Zane doodled on a piece of parchment. “So what about question one?” he said without looking up. “Where is the Hall of Elder’s Crossing?”

James and Ralph exchanged blank looks. James said, “No clue, again. But I think there’s a third question we need to think about, too.”

“As if the first two weren’t tricky enough,” Ralph muttered.

Zane glanced up, and James saw he was doodling the gate to the Grotto Keep. “What’s the third question?”

“Why haven’t they done it yet?” James whispered. “If they believe they have all three relics, why haven’t they just gone on down to wherever this Hall of Elder’s Crossing is and tried to call Merlin back from his thousand year disappearance?”

None of them had any answers, but they agreed it was an important question. Zane flipped his doodle over, revealing a drabble of scribbled notes and diagrams from Arithmancy class. “I’m checking the Ravenclaw library, but between homework, classes, Quidditch, debate and Constellations Club, I hardly have two minutes left to rub together.”

Ralph dropped his quill on the table and leaned back, stretching. “How’s that coming, anyway? You’re the only one with any contact with Madame Delacroix. What’s she like?”

“Like a gypsy mummy with a pulse,” Zane replied. “She and Trelawney are supposed to be sharing Constellations Club, like Divination class, but they’ve started trading on and off instead of teaching it together. Works a lot better, since they sort of cancel each other out, anyway. Trelawney just has us sketch astrological symbols and look at the planets through the telescope to ‘ascertain the moods and manners of the planetary brethren’.” James, who knew Sybil Trelawney as a distant family friend, grinned at Zane’s affectionate impression of her. Zane went on, “Delacroix, though, she has us plotting star charts and measuring the color of starlight wavelengths, working out the exact timing of some big astronomical event.”

“Oh, yeah,” James remembered. “The alignment of the planets. Petra and Ted told me about that. They’re in divination with her. Seems like the voodoo queen’s really into that kind of stuff.”

“She’s the anti-Trelawney, that’s for sure. With her, it’s all math and calculations. We know the date it’ll happen, but she wants us to factor out the exact timing right down to the minute. Pure busy-work if you ask me. She’s a little kooky about it.”

“She’s kooky in general, if you ask me.” Ralph stated.

“I think she might be onto us.” James said in a hushed voice. “I’ve seen her looking at me sometimes.”

Zane raised his eyebrows and pointed at his eyes. “She’s blind, if you remember. She’s not looking at anything, mate.”

“I know,” James said, undeterred. “But I swear that she knows something. I think she has ways of seeing that don’t have anything to do with her eyes.”

“Let’s not freak ourselves out,” Ralph said quickly. “This is freaky enough already. She can’t know anything. If she did, she’d act on it, right? So forget about her.”

The next day James and Ralph went to visit Hagrid in his cabin, ostensibly to inquire after Grawp and Prechka. Hagrid was rebuilding the wagon Prechka had accidentally destroyed and was glad of the break. He invited them in and served them tea and biscuits while he warmed himself by the fire, Trife lying over his feet and occasionally licking Hagrid’s lowered hand.

“Oh, it’s all ups and downs for them,” Hagrid said, as if the tumults of giant courtship were a quaint mystery. “They fought fer a while over the holiday. Lover’s spat over an elk carcass. Grawpie wanted the head, but Prechka wanted to make the antlers into a bit o’ jewelry.”

Ralph took a break from blowing steam off his tea. “She wanted to make jewelry out of elk antlers?”

“Well, I say jewelry,” Hagrid said, raising his huge palms. “It’s a tricky concept. Giants use the same sound fer jewelry an’ weapons. Comes to the same thing when yeh’re twenty feet tall, I s’pose. Anyway, they worked that all out and now they’re happy as can be again.”

James asked, “Is she still living up in the foothills, Hagrid?”

“Sure she is.” Hagrid said, a little reproachfully. “She’s an hon’rable girl, is Prechka. And Grawp, why he bides his time in his hovel most days. Got ‘imself a right nice firepit and a lean-to of birches. These things take time. Giant love is... well, it’s a delicate thing, don’cher know.”

Ralph coughed a little on his tea.

“Hey, Hagrid,” James said, changing the topic. “You’ve been around Hogwarts for a long time. You probably know lots of secret stuff about the school and the castle, don’t you?”

Hagrid settled into his chair. “Well, sure. Nobody knows the grounds s’well as myself. Except maybe Argus Filch. I started out as a student, I did, a-ways back before even yer dad was born.”

James knew he had to be very careful. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Tell me, Hagrid, if somebody had something really magical they wanted to hide in the castle somewhere...?”

Hagrid stopped petting Trife. He turned his great shaggy head toward James slowly. “And what would a first year pup like yerself be needing to hide, might I ask?”

“Oh, not me, Hagrid.” James said quickly. “Somebody else. I’m just curious.”

Hagrid's beetle black eyes twinkled. "I see. And this somebody else, I'm wondering what they might be up to, then, hiding secret magical items here and there..."

Ralph took a large, deliberate sip of the his tea. James looked out the window, avoiding Hagrid's suddenly penetrating gaze. "Oh, you know, nothing particular. I was just wondering..."

"Ah." Hagrid said, smiling slightly and nodding. "Yeh've been told a lot of stories about old Hagrid from yer dad and aunt Hermione and uncle Ron, I'm guessing. Hagrid used to let slip some details that maybe he was supposed to keep secret. S'true, too. I can be a bit thick sometimes, forgetting what I should and shouldn't be saying. Yeh may recall stories about a certain dog named Fluffy, among others, yes?" Hagrid studied James intently for a few moments, and then heaved a great sigh. "James, m'boy, I'm a good bit older than I was then. Old Keepers of the Grounds don't learn much, but we do learn. Besides, yer dad clued me in that you might be getting up to dickens and asked me to keep an eye out for yeh. Soon as he noticed yeh'd, er, *borrowed* his invisibility cloak the Marauder's Map, that was."

"What?" James blurted, turning so quickly he almost knocked over his tea.

Hagrid's bushy eyebrows rose. "Oh. Well. There yeh go, then. I don't suppose I was meant to tell you that," He frowned thoughtfully, then seemed to dismiss it. "Ah, well, he didn't actually tell me *not* to mention it."

James sputtered, "He knows? Already?"

"James," Hagrid laughed, "Yer dad's the head of the Department of Aurors, in case yeh forgot. Talked to him about it last week right in me own fire, here. What he's most curious about is whether or not yeh've gotten the map to work yet, since so much of the castle's been rebuilt. He forgot to test it when he was here. So, had any luck, then?"

In the adventure of capturing the Merlin robe, James had completely forgotten about the Marauder's Map. Sulkily, he told Hagrid that he hadn't tried it yet.

"Prob'ly for the best, yeh know." Hagrid replied. "Just 'cause yer dad knows yeh nicked it doesn't mean he's happy about it. And so far as I was able to gather, yer mum doesn't know about it at all, yet. If yeh're lucky, she won't, neither, although I can't imagine yer dad keeping that kind of secret from her fer long. Best just to keep yer contraband packed away rather than hiding it anywhere on the grounds. Trust me, James. Keeping suspicious magical items around the school can cause a lot more trouble than it's worth."

On the way back to the castle, bundled against the windy cold, Ralph asked James, "What's he mean about getting the map to work? What's it do?"

James explained the Marauder's Map to Ralph, feeling vaguely worried and annoyed that his dad already knew about his taking it and the invisibility cloak. He'd known he'd get caught eventually, but had assumed he'd get a howler about it rather than a ribbing from Hagrid.

Ralph was interested in the map. “It really shows everybody who’s in the castle and where they are? That’d be seriously useful! So how does it work?”

“You have to say a special phrase. Dad told me a long time ago, but I can’t remember it off the top of my head. We’ll give it a try some night. Right now, I don’t want to think about it.”

Ralph nodded and let the subject drop. They entered the castle through the main portico and parted at the stairs leading to the cellars and the Slytherin quarters.

It was getting late and James found himself alone in the corridors. The wintry night was cloudy and starless. It pressed against the windows and sucked at the light of the hall torches. James shivered, partly at the cold and partly at a sense of icy dread that seemed to be seeping into the corridor, filling it like a heavy fog from the floor up. He walked faster, wondering how it could be that the halls were so dark and empty. It wasn’t particularly late, and yet the air had a sense of chilly stillness that felt like the dead of morning, or the air of a sealed crypt. He realized he’d been walking rather farther than the corridor should have allowed. Surely he should have come to the intersection with the statue of the one-eyed witch by now, where he’d turn left into the reception hall, leading to the staircases. James stopped and glanced back the way he had come. The hall looked the same, and yet *wrong* somehow. It looked far too long. The shadows of it seemed to be in the wrong places, teasing his eye somehow. And then he noticed there were no torches on the walls. The light hung empty, ghostly, bleeding its color from flickering yellow to shimmery silver, fading even as he watched.

Fear leaped onto James’ back, icy cold and undeniable. He spun back to the front, meaning to run, but his feet failed him when he saw what was ahead. The corridor was still there, but the pillars had become the trunks of trees. The ribs of the vaulted ceilings had turned to limbs and vines, with nothing beyond but the vast face of the night sky. Even the pattern of the tiled floor melted into a lacework of roots and dead leaves. And then, even as James watched, the illusion of the school corridor evaporated completely, leaving only forest. Cold wind barreled past him, whipping his cloak and threading the hair back from his temples with ghostly fingers. James recognized where he was, even though the last time he’d been here the leaves had still been on the trees and the crickets had been singing their chorus. This was the wood bordering the lake, near the island of the Grotto Keep. The trees groaned, rubbing their bare branches together in the wind, and the sound was like low voices moaning in sleep, wrapped in fever dreams. James realized he was walking again, moving toward the edge of the trees, where the reeds swished and bobbed at the edge of the lake. A great dark mass rose beyond, blotting out the view. As James approached, apparently helpless to stop his plodding feet, the moon unveiled from a bank of dense clouds. The Island of the Grotto Keep revealed itself in the moonglow, and James’ breath caught in his chest. The Island had grown. The impression of a secret fortress was stronger than ever. It was a gothic monstrosity, decked with grim statues and leering gargoyles, all somehow grown from the vines and trees of the island. The dragon’s maw of the bridge lay before him, and James forced himself to stop there, without setting a foot onto it. He remembered the gnashing wooden teeth as it had tried to devour him and Zane. In the silvery moonlight, the gates at the other end of the bridge were quite visible, as well as the words of the poem. *When by the light of Sulva bright I found the Grotto*

Keep. The gates suddenly shuddered and flung open, revealing blackness like a throat. A voice came out of that blackness, clear and beautiful, pure as a chiming bell.

“Keeper of the relic,” said the voice. “Your duty is satisfied.”

As James stood and watched, looking across the bridge into the darkness of the open doorway, a light formed there. It condensed, solidified, and assumed a shape. It was, James recognized, the gently glowing shape of a dryad, a woman of the wood, a tree sprite. It wasn’t the same one he had met before, however. That one had glowed with a green light. This one’s light was pale blue. She pulsed slightly. Her hair flowed around her head as if in a current of water. A quiet, almost loving smile was on her lips and her huge, liquid eyes twinkled gently.

“You have performed your role,” the dryad said, her voice as dreamy and hypnotic as the other dryad’s had been, if not more so. “You need not guard the relic. This is not your burden. Bring it to us. We are its guardians. Ours is the task, granted from the beginning. Relieve yourself of its weight. Bring us the relic.”

James looked down and saw that, without realizing it, he had taken a step onto the bridge. The dragon’s maw hadn’t closed on him. He glanced up and saw that it had actually pulled upwards a bit, welcoming him. The junction of the fallen trees which formed the jaw creaked slightly.

“Bring us the relic,” the Dryad said again, and she lifted her arms toward James as if she meant to welcome him with an embrace. Her arms were unnaturally long, almost as if they stretched out to him over the bridge. Her fingernails were a blue so deep it was nearly purple. They were long and surprisingly ragged. James retreated a step, backing off the bridge. The dryad’s eyes changed. They brightened and hardened.

“Bring us the relic.” she said once more, and her voice changed as well. The song had leaked out of it. “It isn’t yours. Its power is greater than you, greater than all of you. Bring it to us before it unmakes you. The relic destroys those whom it does not need, and it no longer needs you. Bring it to us before it decides to use someone else. Bring us the relic while you still can.”

Her long arms reached across the bridge and James felt sure he could touch them if he reached out. He backed away further, hooking his heel on a root and stumbling. He turned, pinwheeling his arms for a handhold, and fell against something broad and hard. He pressed his hands against it and pushed backwards, righting himself. It was the stone of a wall. Five feet away, a torch crackled in its sconce. James glanced around. The corridor of Hogwarts stretched away, warm and mundane, as if he’d never left. Perhaps he never had. He looked the other direction. There was the intersection with the statue of the one-eyed witch. The sense of dread was gone, and yet James felt certain that what had happened hadn’t just been a vision of some kind. He could still feel the chill of the night wind in the folds of his cloak. When he looked down, there was a crumble of dry river mud on the end of his shoe. He shivered, then gathered himself and ran the rest of the way to the stairs, where he took two at a time climbing to the common room.

The only thing James was sure of was that something wanted him to give up the Merlin robe. He just wasn't sure it was the *right* something. Fortunately, the robe was still locked away in Jackson's bag in James' trunk. After his experience with touching the robe, James had no plans to take the robe out of the trunk again until he handed it over to his dad and the department of aurors, when the time was right. The time wasn't right yet, but it would be. Soon. Either way, he wasn't about to hand it over to some mysterious entity, tree-sprite or not. Confident of this, James reached the Gryffindor common room and prepared for bed. Still, long after he had settled under his blankets, he thought he could hear the whispering voice in the wind beyond the window, pleading with him endlessly, monotonously: *bring us the relic... bring us the relic while you still can...* It chilled him, and when he did sleep, he dreamed of those haunting, beautiful eyes and those long, long arms with the thin hands and ragged, purple fingernails.



The following Friday, at Herbology class, James was amused to see that Neville Longbottom had moved Ralph's transfigured peach tree out of the Transfiguration classroom, where it had become rather cumbersome, and into one of the greenhouses.

"All this from a banana?" Neville confirmed to James after class.

"Yeah. I bet Ralph was more surprised than anybody. He's amazing, but I don't think he knows his own power, really. Some of the other Slytherins think he's got some powerful old magical family in his bloodline. Could be, I suppose, since he never knew his mum."

"That's the sort of thing they'd think." Neville said with unusual candor. "Muggle-borns can be just as powerful as anyone born of an old pureblood family. Some prejudices never change, though."

James looked up at the peach tree, which had become rather large despite the fact that its roots were still twined hopelessly around one of the Transfiguration room tables. He knew Neville was right, but he

couldn't help thinking about the look on Ralph's face the day he'd transfigured the banana. Ralph had never said so, but James had a sense that Ralph's power frightened him just a little.

The next day, the Gryffindor Quidditch team was slated in a match against the Slytherins. James sat in the Gryffindor stands with Zane and Sabrina Hildegard. Ralph, for purposes of maintaining his few Slytherin friends, sat in the green-decked grandstand across the pitch. James made eye contact with Ralph once and waved. Ralph waved back, but carefully, being sure not to be seen by his older Housemates.

Below, on the field, the team captains strode out to the centerline to meet with Cabe Ridcully for the declaration of rules and a handshake; a tradition that nobody really paid any attention to anymore. James watched Justin Kennely shake Tabitha Corsica's hand perfunctorily. Even from his vantage point high in the grandstand, James could see the smarmy, polite smile on Tabitha's admittedly beautiful face. Then, both turned and walked in opposite directions back to their holding pens beneath the stands, leaving Ridcully alone with the Quidditch trunk.

Zane happily munched a bag of popcorn he'd brought with him, having somehow convinced one of the kitchen house elves to prepare it. "This should be an excellent match," he observed, taking in the high-spirited crowd.

"Gryffindor against Slytherin is always a crowd-stopper," Sabrina said, raising her voice over the noise. "Back in my mum's day, everybody hated Slytherin because they were dirty players. A guy named Miles Bletchley was the team captain back then, and he went on to play for the Thundelarra Thunderers for a couple of years, until he was booted from the league for using a corked broom."

"A what?" Zane interjected. "How do you cork a broom?"

James explained, "It's a kind of cheating where a hole is drilled down the center of the broom and something magical is threaded into it, like a dragon's rib or a basilisk fang. Basically turns the whole broom into a magic wand. He was using it to cast deflection charms and modified expeliarmus spells, making the opposing team fumble the quaffle. Really crooked old bugger, he was."

As he spoke, the Slytherin team streaked out from their holding pen to the sound of cheers from their grandstand. Damien, seated in the broadcast booth with his wand to his throat, announced the team, his voice echoing in the crisp January air.

"So," Zane called over the cheers, "Doesn't seem like everybody hates the Slytherins anymore."

Sure enough, there was scattered applause throughout the rest of the grandstands. Only the Gryffindor stands booed and hissed. James shrugged. "They don't seem to play as dirty as they used to. But they still field unusually strong teams. There's something dodgy about them, it's just not as obvious as it used to be."

"I'll say," Zane agreed. "When we played Sytherin before the break, it was as clean a match as I've played all year. Ridcully barely called a single foul on 'em. Still, there was something just a little *too slick*

about them. They're either the luckiest bunch of skunks ever to mount brooms or they've made a deal with the devil himself."

James gritted his teeth.

Across the pitch, Horace Slughorn, red-cheeked and bundled in a fur-collared coat and matching hat, waved a small Slytherin flag on a stick and yelled encouragements to his House team. Ralph, seated two rows below him, applauded dutifully. James knew that Ralph wasn't much of a Quidditch fan, despite the almost studious attention he paid to the matches, and James guessed that it was because Ralph couldn't really choose a team to be loyal to. His friends, including Rufus Burton, cheered and hooted wildly.

The Gryffindor team took to the pitch next, streaming from the holding pen beneath their grandstand, and the spectators around James erupted, leaping to their feet as one. James shouted right alongside them, grinning and ecstatic, certain that the Gryffindors would win. He stomped his feet and yelled himself hoarse as the team circled the pitch, waving and grinning.

The teams flew into position. After instructing the teams to play a clean match and assuring everyone was in position, Ridcully released the bludgers and snitch and tossed the quaffle into the air. The players collapsed into a swarm, chasing the bludgers and wrestling over the quaffle. Noah and Tom Squallus, the two seekers, streaked off after the snitch, which darted around the Ravenclaw banners and vanished.

Almost immediately, the difference between the teams became apparent. Gryffindor fought a textbook match, based entirely on carefully practiced drills. Justin Kennely could be heard shouting plays and formations over the cheering crowd, pointing and giving signs. The Slytherins, on the other hand, seemed to have a graceful, almost eerie playing style that moved them over the pitch like a school of fish. Tabitha Corsica called no directions from her broom, and yet her players peeled off and regrouped with dancelike precision. Once, while in possession, Tabitha ducked under a bludger and simultaneously tossed the quaffle over her shoulder. The ball arced through the air and was deftly caught by a team-mate who had flown a perpendicular course directly underneath her. The team-mate underhanded the quaffle through the center goal before the Gryffindor keeper even realized Tabitha didn't have it anymore. James groaned while the Slytherins stood and cheered. Justin Kennely looked as if he wanted to jump up and down on his broom in frustration. Still, an hour into the match, the score was one hundred and thirty to one hundred and forty in favor of Gryffindor; close enough that the lead had changed five times.

"It's all about the seekers in a match like this." Sabrina yelled exuberantly, not taking her eyes from the players. "And Squallus is new to that position since Gnoffton finished last year. Noah should be able to nail him to the wall with his own broom."

Sure enough, a sudden roar went up from the crowd and James saw that Noah was in pursuit of the snitch. Across the pitch, Tom Squallus was bent over his broom, baring his teeth into the cold wind and rushing to cut Noah off. He banked through the throng of players, barely missed by Justin Kennely's swatted bludger. Despite his speed, James was confident there was no way Squallus would beat Noah to the prize. A golden streak and a whir of tiny wings buzzed by the Gryffindor grandstand, followed a split-second later by

Noah. Those in the front rows ducked, then leapt to their feet cheering as Noah banked hard, barely missing the grandstand and lunging forward on his broom, arm out-stretched. There was a long, breathless moment when Noah appeared to be in the tow of the tiny golden ball, the distance shrinking, shrinking, Noah's hand trembling as he reached. Then, in a flurry of cloaks and brooms, something changed. Noah was forced to yank up on his broom, grinding to a slewing stop that destroyed his control. A cloud of Slytherins, led by Tabitha Corsica, had swept in front of him from all directions, stitching a virtual wall in mid-air. Noah ran into a burly Slytherin and bounced off, losing his grip on his broom. He tumbled sideways, grabbing on with one hand and swinging beneath it. The crowd roared.

Tabitha Corsica shot through the wall of Slytherins, which opened for her like an iris. Her cloak whipped behind her and James was amazed to see the snitch flying *behind* her, in the shadow of her cloak. It dipped upwards and Tabitha followed almost instantaneously, bent low over her broom. Somehow, without even looking, she was shadowing the snitch, marking it for Tom Squallus. He saw her, banked hard, and swooped past her. When he came out on the other side, his hand was raised and the snitch glittered within it. The Slytherin grandstands cheered uproariously. The game was over.

Noah swung himself from beneath his broom, hooking one foot over it. He struggled upright just as Ted and Justin Kennely swooped in next to him, talking and gesturing. James understood the nature of what they were saying even if he couldn't hear the words through the cheers and boos. Something extremely odd had happened, and yet the Slytherins hadn't actually committed any fouls. On the grass of the pitch, Petra Morganstern, who played chaser, had cornered Cabe Ridcully and was animatedly pointing at Tabitha Corsica, who was still on her broom, being congratulated by her team-mates alongside Tom Squallus. Ridcully shook his head, unable or unwilling to agree with Petra's allegations. There didn't seem to be any recourse for the Gryffindors, since they couldn't prove that anything illegal had actually occurred.

"What in the name of Voldy's pasty-white rear end was *that*?" Damien Damascus demanded, having quit the broadcast booth and joined James, Zane and Sabrina.

Sabrina shook her head. "That was right creepy. Did you see what I saw? Corsica blocked the snitch! She never touched it, but she flew right next to it, marking it until Squallus could get his broom in gear."

"There's no rule against that?" Zane asked as they all joined the throng leaving the stands.

"No point making rules against things that are impossible," Damien said crossly. "As long as she didn't touch it, she's in the clear. She wasn't even *watching* the snitch. I'd swear it."

Ralph was trotting across the pitch when James and Zane tromped down the last few steps. Panting, he angled them away from Sabrina and Damien, whose moods were getting fouler.

"Did you see that?" Ralph asked, struggling to catch his breath. He seemed extremely agitated.

"We saw *something*," James said, "although I'm not sure I believe my eyes."

Zane was less diplomatic. “The Gryffindors think your buddies cheated somehow. It’s going to throw off the final standings, too. Now it looks like Ravenclaw will be playing Slytherin for the tournament. I was hoping for a Gryffindor and Ravenclaw match.”

“Will you two forget about the bloody Quidditch tournament for a minute?” Ralph said, turning to face the two of them at the base of the grandstands. “In case you’ve forgotten, we have more important things to think about.”

“All right, then spill it, Ralph,” James said, trying not to be annoyed.

Ralph took a deep breath. “You told me I was your man on the inside, didn’t you? So I’ve been watching closely, looking for hints and clues about who might be involved with the whole Merlin plot, right?”

“And you think now is the time to discuss this?” Zane asked, raising his eyebrows.

“No, no, it’s fine,” James interjected. “What’d you see, Ralph? Something going on back at Slytherin Central?”

“No!” Ralph said impatiently. “Not back at the common room or anything. Right here, just a few minutes ago! Remember what we’re supposed to be looking for?”

“Yeah,” Zane said, becoming interested. “The Merlin staff.”

Ralph nodded meaningfully. There was a cheer nearby. The three boys turned as the Slytherins left the pitch, surrounded by a crowd of students in green scarves. Tabitha walked at the head of the group, her broom held triumphantly over her shoulder.

“Six feet or so of unusually magical wood,” Ralph said in a low voice, still watching Tabitha leave the pitch. “Origins unknown.”

“That’s right!” James replied, understanding dawning on him. “Tabitha said her broom was a custom design, crafted by some Muggle artist or something! She registered it as a Muggle artifact, since it wasn’t a standard model!”

“And there’s no question that there’s something pretty *unusually* magical about it,” Ralph added. James nodded.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Zane asked incredulously.

Ralph glanced back at him. “Makes sense, doesn’t it? It’s the perfect hiding place! That’s why I came running over here right after the match. I wanted you both to see it, too, and see if it fits.”

Zane whistled in awe. “Talk about your corked brooms! Here, all this time Corsica’s been flying around on Merlin’s flippin’ staff!”

James couldn't take his eyes off it as Tabitha crested the hill heading back to the castle. The wintry sunlight glinted off the bristly tail of the broom. It was indeed the perfect disguise for a six-foot length of highly magical wood. And now they knew for sure who was the third co-conspirator in the Merlin plot, the Slytherin who went by the profile name of Austramaddux. James' heart pounded with excitement and anticipation.

"So," he said as the three of them began to follow the Slytherins at a careful distance, wending their way back to the castle. "How are we going to get the Merlin staff away from Tabitha Corsica?"