



JAMES POTTER AND THE VAULT OF DESTINIES

By G. Norman Lippert

Based upon the Characters and Worlds of J. K. Rowling

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The story thus far...

Greetings again, dear reader! So we've come to the third book in the James Potter series, and things are about to change pretty dramatically. Are you prepared? I'd advise you to keep your wits and wands at the ready as we embark on this journey.

If you are a long-time reader, then you know the story thus far. You were there when the Alma Alerons first arrived at Hogwarts in their peculiar flying cars. You know how the new Hogwarts headmaster came to be, and what his story is. You know all about the Gremlins—including Ted Lupin's dark secret, and Petra Morganstern's tragic past. You witnessed the raising of the Wocket, the return of the Gatekeeper, and the Hogwarts all-school debate. In short, you are prepared (as much as you can be) for what is to come.

If you are new to the James Potter world, then welcome! I know that new readers are discovering these stories every day, and if you happen to be among them, let me extend my personal hope that you will enjoy these tales as much as I have. If you have not yet read “J.P. and the Hall of Elders’ Crossing” or its sequel, then may I be so bold as to encourage you to explore them before continuing on here? As Harry Potter fans, you can imagine how confused a reader might be if they jumped straight to “Prisoner of Azkaban”. Similarly, if you plunge ahead into “Vault of Destinies” without the foundation of the first two James Potter stories, you will likely find yourself almost immediately confused.

In another vein, many of you know that between “Curse of the Gatekeeper” and this tale, I wrote a much shorter book called “The Girl on the Dock”. This book, sometimes called (though not by me) “James Potter Two-and-a-half”, is an entirely original side story featuring James’ friend Petra Morganstern. Suffice it to say, much of what happened in that story heavily influences the plot of “Vault of Destinies”, but fear not, dear reader: I have written the following story in such a way that “Girl on the Dock” is *not* required reading. I mention it only because if there is *any* chance that you’d like to read Petra’s back story spoiler-free, you should probably

do so fairly quickly (specifically, before reading chapter four, “the Dream Story”). For more information on “The Girl on the Dock”, take a look at www.girlonthedock.com.

As always, my great thanks to all of you, all over the world, who have enjoyed these stories and sent me your comments and encouragement. Without you, this book surely would not have happened.

And now, onward and upward! We have a long way to travel, and there are sure to be a lot of challenges along the way, but we’re up for it, aren’t we? At any rate, there’s no turning back now. Constant vigilance, dear reader, for we’re off to strange new lands. Here, there may well be monsters.

As Albus says, keep one hand on your wand and the other on your wallet.



PROLOGUE

Magic, thought Senator Charles “Chuck” Filmore. *I can’t believe this is what I have to stoop to.*

He leaned out of the open glass doorway of the building and smiled winningly at the cameras positioned on the other side of Chambers Street. The normally crowded thoroughfare was cordoned off on either end, blocked with orange barricades and New York City police officers, all of whom looked bored and sullen in their dark caps and side arms. Behind the barricades, raucous crowds had gathered, waving and grinning at the cameras. That was one thing Filmore both loved and hated about this town: no matter what time of day it was, there was always a block party ready to erupt at the slightest provocation, complete with tee shirt vendors, sign wavers, and wide-eyed tourists, looking like aquarium goldfish who’d suddenly found themselves in the Great Barrier Reef. Filmore waved left and right, showing all of his freshly whitened teeth in a huge practiced grin. Flashbulbs popped and flickered and the crowd cheered. They weren’t really cheering for him, of course, and he knew it. They were cheering because his was the face currently up on the portable JumboTron television screen. It wouldn’t have mattered if the face had belonged to a Bloomingdale’s mannequin. That was another thing about New York crowds: they were fairly

indiscriminate about the things they applauded, so long as there was a good chance they'd be seen on television doing it.

The face on the JumboTron changed. Now it belonged to the great smarmy magician, Michael Byrne. He was dressed in an open-throated black shirt, his glossy hair hanging lank around his face, framing his handsome smile. Byrne didn't grin, of course, as Filmore had. He looked impishly sly, his eyes flicking back and forth, as if he wasn't even aware of the camera that had to be (Filmore knew from experience) less than two feet from his face. Byrne was a born showman, and he was extremely persuasive, even when he wasn't saying a word. That was part of what had made him so successful as a stage magician. The crowd *wanted* to believe in his tricks. In fact, if it hadn't been for Byrne's infectious charms, insincere as they obviously were, Filmore might not have even agreed to be part of such a stunt.

"Let's talk brass tacks for a minute," Byrne had said on the day that they had first met in Filmore's office. "You're one of the rising stars of the political world, at least in New York. Everybody knows it, right? Not many other politicians have the kind of name recognition you do. Former Jets quarterback, career Marine, happily married to a prominent Broadway actress. You're poised to launch your way right to the top of the Washington mud wrestling match. You just need one little boost, a little rocket fuel to shoot you up into the media mainstream."

Filmore had disliked the man almost from the beginning, but at that point, Byrne had been talking a language he understood all too well even if he didn't approve of it. Filmore wished he could build a name for himself purely on his political record and his grasp of the needs of his constituency—for despite what many people thought, he was a smart man. He did well on the interview programs and Sunday morning talk shows, partly because of his own brand of square-jawed charm, but also because he, unlike many other senators that he could mention (but didn't), really did understand the issues that were being discussed. Despite this, however, Byrne was right. American voters didn't always vote for the best candidates. In fact, as Filmore well knew, most of them tended to cast their votes based on looks and one-liners as much as they did on qualifications and voting records. There was no point in complaining about it even if Filmore did find it occasionally depressing. The only practical choice was to acknowledge the reality of the current political world and use it to his advantage as best he could.

"You and the Chrysler Building," Byrne had said, smiling and spreading his hands. "Two New York City monoliths, together at the same time. If it works—and it will—people from coast to coast will know your name. Mine too, of course, but that's neither here nor there."

"You're proposing to vanish the Chrysler Building," Filmore had replied, leaning back in his chair and looking out over the cloudy city beyond his office window. "With me in it."

Byrne had shrugged. "What better way to cement both of our careers at the same time, right, Senator? We both know that these days, show business and politics are really just two sides of the same coin. Besides, it'll be fun."

Filmore tilted a sideways glance at Byrne. "How will you do it?"

Byrne sighed languidly. "It's magic," he answered. "Which means it's either surprisingly simple or mind-bogglingly complex. Neither answer is ever very satisfying to the viewer. So what do you say, Senator?"

Filmore had agreed, of course, albeit somewhat reluctantly. If it had required anything more than an evening's stopover in the lobby of the famed steel skyscraper, he probably wouldn't have. Looking around from his vantage point by the lobby doors, he began to get a sense that this trick was, in fact, going to be of the 'mind-bogglingly complex' variety. There were massive mirrors on swiveling stands, for instance, positioned just outside the view of the barricaded crowds. A monstrous scaffolding, nearly thirty stories tall, had been erected in front of the building. It was equipped with a skyscraper-sized curtain that could be lowered and raised on Byrne's command, giving his crews time to manage whatever complicated machinations were going to be required for the illusion. Looking at the official observation platform, half a block away, Filmore had some idea of how the trick was probably going to be accomplished. He didn't understand all of it, but he understood enough to know that the entire trick depended on countless tiny details, from sightlines and camera editing to crowd psychology and even the angle of the setting sun. In his own way, Byrne was very intelligent, although, as the man had suggested, seeing some of the complicated behind-the-scenes rigging of such a trick definitely tended to reduce one's appreciation for it.

Now that he was officially off-camera, Filmore turned and crossed the deserted lobby, entering a side door next to the security desk. There, he found a small room dominated by two soda machines, a long leather sofa and a plasma television. On the screen, a remote feed of the external cameras showed what the rest of the world was going to see. Filmore's bodyguard, John Deckham, a former fellow football player with a perfectly bald head, was seated on the sofa, watching the proceedings on the huge plasma screen with mild interest.

"Looked good," Deckham commented, nodding toward the television. "They did a close up on you waving. Very 'man of the people'."

Filmore sighed as he sat down on the opposite end of the sofa. "Feels like schtick. I hate schtick."

"Schtick makes the world go 'round," Deckham shrugged, lifting a bag of pistachios and pouring out a handful.

Filmore settled in to watch the event. On the screen, Michael Byrne raised his arms as the camera zoomed dramatically toward him, framing him against the sunset as it reflected from the city's mirrored windows.

"And now," Byrne announced, his voice amplified over the crowd, echoing grandly, "you've seen me escape from Alcatraz prison. You've witnessed my triumph over the Egyptian Sepulcher of Doom. You've watched as I've vanished a live elephant, and then an airliner, and finally a moving freight train. Now, for the first time ever, I will perform the greatest feat of illusion ever attempted. Not only will I vanish one of the greatest landmarks of the city of New York, the legendary Chrysler Building, from its very foundation: I will do so while it is occupied by your senator, a landmark himself, the honorable and respected Charles Hyde Filmore!"

On the screen, the crowd cheered again. Filmore could hear the echo of their cheers emanating from the lobby beyond. Byrne smiled triumphantly into the camera, extending his arms, palms up, exulting amidst the dying sunlight. As the crowd began to quiet again, banks of spotlights ratcheted into place, illuminating the front of the building like an enormous jewel. Byrne raised his arms, still palms up, and then dropped them. On cue, hundreds of yards of red fabric unfurled from the scaffolding that fronted the building. It poured down like water, shimmering grandly in the spotlights, and finally hit the street with an audible *fwump*. From the perspective of the television cameras, as well as the viewers on the observation platform, the curtain completely obscured the building. Standing silhouetted against the waving red fabric, Byrne lowered his head. He appeared to be in deep concentration. The crowd waited breathlessly.

At the end of the sofa, Deckham rooted in his bag of pistachios. “So, how’s he doing this anyway?” he asked. “Did he tell you?”

“No,” Filmore replied. “Trade secret and all that. All I know is we’re supposed to wait in here for a minute or so while he convinces everyone the place has disappeared. When it’s all over, the building reappears and I come back out the front door, waving like a goombah. Thank you and goodnight.”

“Are we really the only people in the whole building?”

Filmore nodded, smiling ruefully. “That Byrne’s a genius, really. He arranged to have the Department of Health evacuate the building, claiming that he could only promise the safety of one person—yours truly—when the building ‘crossed over into the unknowable dimensions’.”

“He didn’t,” Deckham laughed, crunching pistachios.

Filmore nodded again. On the television screen, Byrne was still standing with his head down, his arms hanging at his sides as if somebody had switched him off. A drumroll began. Slowly, Byrne began to raise his arms again, and as he did, he turned away from the wall of shimmering red fabric. The drumroll increased, building to an almost unbearable crescendo. Now Byrne had his back fully to the curtain, arms raised and head lowered, his hair obscuring his face, and still he paused.

Suddenly, the building around Filmore shuddered violently. Dust sifted from the ceiling and the power flickered, sputtered, and died. Filmore sat up, alarmed.

“What was—” he began, but stopped as a whirring noise deep in the bowels of the building cycled to life. The lights flickered on again and the television screen blinked into motion.

Deckham looked wary. “Was that supposed to happen?”

“I... guess so,” Filmore answered slowly, nodding toward the television. “Look.”

Apparently, the scene outside had not changed. Byrne still stood with his arms held out, his head lowered. Finally, theatrically, he dropped his arms and raised his head, flinging his hair back. Jets of white sparks burst into the air and the red curtain dropped, swirling and billowing as it fell. Beyond it was only empty space, punctuated by the crisscrossing beams of a dozen spotlights. The

great shining building certainly appeared to be gone. The crowd exploded into frenzied applause and a live band struck up a tumultuous fanfare.

"Not bad," Deckham commented, relaxing a bit. "Looks pretty real."

"Meh," Filmore replied, squinting up at the screen. "It's too dark. You should be able to see the buildings behind it. The spotlights are distracting everyone."

"I guess you're just too cynical for magic, Chuck. Better just stick to politics, eh?" The big man climbed to his feet, balling the pistachio bag between his huge hands. "I'm gonna hit the men's room before we go."

"Sure," Filmore muttered, still watching the screen. Deckham brushed a few pistachio shells from his pants and disappeared through the bathroom door in a corner of the small room.

Outside, Byrne had commanded the curtain to be raised once more. Slowly, it cinched upwards, once again concealing the mysteriously dark view and the sweeping spotlights. The television screen panned over the observers on the main platform, showing their rapt wonder, eyes wide and mouths agape. Filmore imagined that they'd been forced to practice that expression during rehearsals. Maybe Deckham was right; maybe he was just too cynical for magic. *Ah well*, he thought, *worse things have been said about people*.

Across the room, the lobby door pushed slowly open as a breeze forced its way through. Filmore frowned at it. The breeze smelled vaguely unusual, although he couldn't quite place it. It was a fresh smell, wild and earthy.

"And now," the televised voice of Michael Byrne announced grandly, "witness the completion of tonight's feat. Ladies and gentlemen, let me reintroduce to you, your Chrysler Building, and your senator, Charles Hyde Filmore!" He raised his hands once more, facing the curtain this time. Another drumroll sounded, even louder this time.

"Hurry it up, Deckham," Filmore said, climbing to his feet. "The fat lady's about to sing."

Another vibration shook the building, making the lights flicker once more. Somewhere far off and high above, something crashed. Filmore glanced around nervously.

On the screen, Byrne allowed his fingers to tremble on the ends of his outstretched arms. The drumroll redoubled, drawing out the tension like a knife. Finally, with a grand flourish, Byrne threw himself forward onto his knees, bringing his arms down as if he himself were stripping the enormous curtain away from the scene. The curtain dropped, untethered this time, and drifted sideways in the breeze. It crumpled to the street messily, throwing up a cloud of dust and grit.

Behind it was nothing.

Filmore blinked at the screen, his eyes widening. Something had gone wrong. Not only was the Chrysler Building still missing, so was the mysterious blackness that had filled the space. Distant buildings could be seen beyond the rising dust, their windows glowing yellow in the dimness of the falling night. Byrne hadn't moved. He remained in the foreground of the television scene, kneeling, his head raised to the unexpected sight. Eerie silence filled the street all around.

"It's gone!" a far-off voice yelled suddenly. The camera view changed, cutting to a closer shot of Chambers Street. Acres of limp red curtain could be seen in the spotlights, covering the street like a blanket. The camera turned. Where the Chrysler Building should have stood was a great, broken hole. Pipes and electrical wiring jutted from the hole's sides, spurting water and sparks. "It's gone!" the voice cried out again, closer this time. "It's completely gone, and so is the senator!"

The crowd responded like a beast. A low roar rippled over it, confusion and disbelief mingled with panic, and the roar quickly turned into a cacophony. The view spun, focused on the observation platform. It zoomed in, centering on the figure of Michael Byrne. He was still kneeling, his face slack, completely perplexed and disbelieving. To Filmore, he looked virtually catatonic.

"Deckham! Something's wrong! Get out here!"

There was no answer. Filmore crossed to the bathroom door and flung it open. It was a very small room, with only one toilet and a sink. It was perfectly empty. A pair of shoes sat on the floor in front of the toilet, black leather, still tied. Filmore boggled down at them, speechless.

Another gust of wildly scented air pushed through the room, bringing the sound of the roaring crowd with it. Filmore turned, peering back at the doorway into the lobby. It swung shut slowly on its pneumatic arm. The television still flickered and warbled, but Filmore didn't notice it anymore. Slowly, cautiously, he crossed the floor.

The lobby was much brighter than it had been, illuminated by a strangely brilliant fog that pressed against the glass doors. Filmore stepped around the security desk and heard a wet smacking sound. He looked down and saw that he had stepped into a puddle. It rippled around his shoes, coursing merrily over the marble floor toward the banks of elevators. The entire floor was covered with water. It reflected the brilliance of the doors, throwing snakes of refracted light up onto the high ceilings. Filmore felt as if he was in a dream. Slowly, he made his way toward the front doors. Maybe, he thought, this was all just part of the trick. Maybe Byrne was simply a much better showman than Filmore had given him credit for. The view beyond the glass doors was seamlessly white, moving faintly, almost like mist. Filmore jumped suddenly as a gust of wind battered the doors, pushing them inwards with enough pressure to force more of that exotically scented air through. The breeze rippled over Filmore, threading through his hair and flapping his tie. The air was damp and warm.

Filmore reached out and touched the door. He steeled himself, squared his jaw, and pushed.

The door opened easily, admitting a burst of warm, misty breeze and a heavy roar. He had thought that the noise was the roar of the New York City crowd, but now he knew that that had been a mistake. No collection of human voices could make a noise like that. It was deafening and seamless, huge as the sky. Filmore stepped out into that sound, straining to see through the blinding whiteness.

The wind picked up again, suddenly and wetly, and it pushed the mist away, breaking it apart enough for Filmore to finally see the source of the noise. He craned his head back, higher and higher, his eyes bulging at the bizarre and inexplicable enormity of what he was witnessing.

Surrounding the building, encompassing it on three sides, was a wall of thundering water, so high and so broad that it seemed to dwarf the shining steel tower. It was a waterfall of such proportions that it defied belief. Filmore found himself stunned by it, nearly unable to move, even as it drenched him with its pounding, battering mists. Somehow, impossibly, the Chrysler Building had been transported, vanished away, to some entirely fantastic location. Filmore shook himself, breaking his paralysis, and spun around, looking back at the building behind him. It stood entirely intact, leaning very slightly, on a shelf of rock in the middle of a heaving tropical river. Its windows dripped with water, reflecting the mountain around it and its bounding, lush jungles.

"Greetings, Senator," a voice called, shocking Filmore so much that he spun on his heels and nearly fell over. "Sorry about your bodyguard, but the deal was for only one person. He may be somewhere, but let me assure you, he is not here."

"Wha...!" Filmore stammered faintly. He opened and closed his mouth several times, boggling at the figure as it approached through the mist, walking jauntily. It appeared to be a man, dressed all in black. A cloak flapped about his shoulders and his face was covered in a bizarre, metallic mask. As the figure approached, Filmore saw several more similarly dressed shapes unsheathe from the pounding mist, keeping their distance but watching him carefully.

"Do pardon the omission, Senator," the dark figure called out, stopping suddenly. His voice bore the cultured clip of a British accent. He seemed to be smiling. "I understand there are traditions to be seen to. This is, after all, a magic trick." The man curled a hand to his masked mouth, cleared his throat, and then threw out both arms in a grand gesture that seemed to encompass the Chrysler Building, the thundering waterfall, and even Charles Filmore himself.

"Ta-daa!" he cried out, clear as crystal in the roaring noise. And then he laughed, and laughed, and laughed.



A great distance away and some weeks later, a short order cook struck a bell with his slab of a hand and clunked a steaming plate onto the counter.

"Number three, hold the O, extra mayo, get it while it's hot," he called without looking.

A waitress in a dingy rayon dress blew hair out of her face in annoyance. "Keep your hair on, I'll get it in a second." She turned back to an overweight couple crammed into the window booth.

They leaned over the little dog-eared menus, studying them as if they were final exams. The man looked up at the waitress, his eyes swimming in a huge pair of black-rimmed glasses.

"Does the tuna come open-faced or in one of those fancy tomato bowls?"

"Fancy—" the waitress blinked. She scoffed good-naturedly. "You don't know where you are, do you?"

"We're in Bridgend, aren't we?" the overweight woman said suddenly, glancing up at the waitress and then looking worriedly at her husband. "Aren't we? I told you we should've taken the expressway. We're lost now, aren't we?"

"No, I mean—" the waitress began, but the man interrupted her, producing a large folded map from his breast pocket.

"Bridgend," he said emphatically, unfolding the map and stabbing at it with a pudgy finger. "Right 'ere, see? You saw the sign when we left the last roundabout."

"I've seen a lot of signs today, Herbert," the woman huffed, sitting up primly in the red booth.

"Look," the waitress said, lowering her order pad, "if you two need a few more minutes—"

The bell at the counter dinged again, louder this time. The waitress glanced back, her temper flaring, but another waitress passed behind her and touched her shoulder.

"I'll get it, Trish," the younger (and decidedly prettier) waitress said. "Table three, right?"

Trish exhaled and scowled at the pickup window. "Thanks, Judy. I swear to you, one of these days..."

"I know, I know," Judy smiled, crossing the narrow floor and waving a hand to show she'd heard it a hundred times before.

Judy ripped an order slip from her pad and jabbed it into one of the clips on the cook's carousel. With a deft movement, she scooped up the plate and carried it to a table in the corner by the door.

"Here you go, love," she said, sliding the plate onto the table in front of a middle-aged man with thinning black hair. "Enjoy."

"Thank you very much," the man replied, smiling and unrolling his napkin so that his silver clattered onto the tabletop. "Why, if I thought I could get waited on by the likes of you every day, I might never even leave."

"You sweet-talker you," Judy replied, cocking her hip. "You're not from around here, then?"

The man shook his head with derision. "Not likely. I'm from up the coast, Cardiff. Just passing through."

"Is that so?" Judy said, smiling enigmatically. "I have family up that way, though I hardly ever get to visit. I wonder if you know any of them?"

The man's smile turned condescending. "Cardiff's a big place, dearie. Unless your daddy's the mayor, seems unlikely I might know 'em, but go ahead."

Judy leaned toward the man and cupped one hand to her mouth, as if she was about to share a secret with him. "Potter," she said, "James Potter. He'd be young... not a boy, but not a man yet either."

The man narrowed his eyes in a parody of deep thought, as if he really wanted to say yes, just to keep the pretty waitress talking to him, but couldn't quite bring himself to do it. He blew out a breath and shook his head. "Sorry, can't say I know 'im. Frankly, I don't run across too many boys anymore, now that my own are mostly grown. My youngest just went off to the milit'ry, you know..."

The waitress nodded, straightening. "You let me know if you need a refill on that, all right?" She smiled again, a somewhat more plastic smile than the one she'd shown him a few moments before, and then turned away.

Trish, the older waitress, was standing by the cash register counting out her end-of-day tips. Without looking up, she said, "What is it with you and this Potter kid? You've been asking about him since your first day here, what, three weeks ago? I, for one, don't believe he's any relation of yours. What is it? He lay into your kid brother or something? His folks owe you money?"

Judy laughed. "Nothing like that. He's just... a friend of a friend. Someone I've lost touch with and want to find again. It's nothing. It's sort of a hobby, really."

Trish chuckled drily. She slammed the register drawer shut and stuck a thin roll of bills into her apron. "Some hobby. I've seen your little apartment, remember? If you want a hobby, maybe you should take up decorating. That place is as bare as Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard. Not even a bed. Creepy, if you ask me."

Judy wasn't listening to Trish. Her eyes were locked on the front window, expressionless and unblinking, transfixed.

"What is it, Judy?" Trish asked, looking up. "You look like someone just walked over your..."

Judy held up a hand, palm out, instructing the older woman to be still. Trish went still. Judy stared through the front window, between the faces of the overweight couple who were still arguing over the map, beyond the narrow footpath and the lamppost, across the street, toward a small man as he ambled slowly down an alley, tapping a twisted cane as he went. Judy's eyes narrowed slightly, quizzically.

Behind her, loudly, the short order cook banged the bell again. A plate clanked onto the counter. Neither Trish nor Judy moved.

"Number six," the cook called, peering at the two women through the little pickup window, his cheeks red and sweaty. "Bangers and mash, no pickle—" he went on, bellowing, but his voice cut off abruptly as Judy raised her hand again, gesturing vaguely toward him. He stared at her, unmoving, as if frozen in place.

Judy moved out from behind the counter, walking with a swift, determined gait that was completely unlike her previous movements.

"I think we're ready to order now," the overweight woman said, smiling hopefully up at her. She froze in place as Judy passed her. The bell jingled over the door as it swept open entirely on its own, so swiftly that it sucked a gust of air through the diner, whipping menus from tables and flapping order slips on the cook's carousel. No one inside seemed to notice. The middle-aged man with thinning black hair sat with his fork half-raised to his mouth, still as a statue.

Judy strode into the misty sunlight and began to cross the street. A horn blared and brakes squealed as a lorry bore down on her, swerving into a deep puddle, but the sound cut off sharply as Judy raised her hand. Fingers of ice erupted from the puddle and embraced the lorry so firmly that it slammed to a halt. It emitted a screech of crimping metal and the driver's head struck the windshield, shattering it into a bright starburst. Judy still had not taken her eyes from the small man with the cane. He turned back at the noise of the mysteriously halted lorry, his eyes gimlet and wary. He saw Judy approaching. His expression didn't change, but when he turned back, he did so with much improved posture. He began to run down the alley, gripping his cane at his side. Judy smiled happily and leapt onto the curb, following the man into the alley.

He ducked into a narrow cross street, not looking back, but Judy was amazingly fast. She was still smiling, and it was a beautiful smile, one filled with delight and a sort of dawning wonder.

"Lemme be!" the man called out, still running. He darted up a short stairway toward a decrepit apartment door and began to fumble a key into the lock. "Lemme be, I didn't do anything wrong!"

Judy reached the bottom of the steps just as the man socked the key home. He jerked the door open and lurched inside, still clutching his cane to his side.

"Please wait," Judy said, raising her hand, but the man didn't look back. Neither did he stop in his tracks as everyone else had. He slammed the door and Judy heard the bolt clack into place. Her smile narrowed, sharpened at the edges, becoming a hard grin. She raised her hand once more, curled her forefinger under her thumb, and pointed it at the door. It looked as if she meant to flick a speck of dust out of the air. She flicked.

The heavy wooden door exploded inwards with a reverberating, hollow crash. It shattered into a dozen pieces, all of which blew partly up the narrow staircase beyond. The small man was halfway up the steps, hunched and gripping the banister, afraid to move.

"I didn't do anything wrong," he cried in a high, tremulous voice, still not looking back. "What've I done? What do you want? Why can't you just leave me be?"

Judy moved forward and began to slowly climb the stairs. The chunks of door clattered aside as she neared them. "Who do you think I am?" she asked, her voice sounding both pleased and amused.

"Well, it's plain, innit?" the man said, trembling. He finally peered back at her from over his right shoulder, still clutching his cane. "You're from the Ministry. You found out about me cane."

It's not a proper wand, not really. I ordered it special through the post, but that's not illegal now, is it? I mean, it barely works at all. It doesn't violate my parole. You don't need to send me back."

"You..." Judy said, still climbing the stairs slowly, smiling in wonder. "You... are a *wizard*. A magical person. Aren't you?"

The man boggled at her over his shoulder, half turning back to her. "What d'you mean, then? What you wanna go and tease me for? You trying to rub it in, now that I have to go and live like the blasted Muggles? All it was was a little robbery. I did my time in Azkaban, fair and square. If I keep me nose clean another eight months, I'll even get me wand back. Why you wanna go scarin' me half to death and then teasin' me about being a wiz—"

The man stopped as he saw the truth in the woman's face. She *wasn't* teasing him. She had nearly reached him now. The two of them stood in the shadows of the stairwell. She was two steps lower than him and yet her eyes were level with his. The man's watery gaze widened as he realized this was because she was floating several inches in the air, still smiling at him in the darkness.

"I see it now," she said, shaking her head in wonderment. "An entirely magical society, living in secret. How very interestingly preposterous. My, how times have changed. And yet it makes sense now. It is no wonder... but what good fortune that I happened to see you, my friend, and to recognize the strange nature of that cane of yours. What, pray tell, is your name?"

The man was still trembling, so much that his teeth chattered when he answered. "Buh-b-b- Blagwell," he stammered. "Harvey. Blagwell."

"What an unfortunate name," the woman frowned. "Tell me, Mr. Blagwell, I wonder if you might be able to help me. I am looking for someone. I've asked so very many people and none of them have been of any assistance to me, although I now understand why. I do so hope you might prove different."

Blagwell nodded jerkily, his eyes bulging.

The woman leaned toward him, floating higher in the air so that she covered him with her shadow. "Have you ever heard of someone named... James Potter?"

Blagwell stared up at her, his lips trembling. He made a sort of coughing noise, and then blurted a ragged chuckle. "P-Potter?" he said, shaking his head as if she was mocking him. "You... you're kidding, right?"

Judy's smile grew. It stretched beyond its normal bounds of prettiness, becoming first a grin, and then a humorless, lunatic rictus. "Tell me more," she breathed.

"Wha-what do you want to know?" Blagwell exclaimed, leaning backwards, wilting under the force of her gaze. "Everybody knows them. Th-th-they're bloody famous, aren't they?"

"*She* is there," the woman answered in a strangely singsong voice, her face now lost in the shadows. "I sensed it in the memory of her thoughts. It wasn't much, but it was all I needed. She went there, seeking refuge after her trial of the lake. I could not follow her, for her trail was lost, but two words remained, imprinted in the ether where the tree once stood, two words that I knew would

take me to her: *James Potter*. Tell me where I may find him. Tell me, and everyone may be happy again. Perhaps even you, my unfortunate friend.”

“Who are you?” Blagwell moaned, terrified.

Her voice came out of the darkness, both maddening and entrancing. She was still smiling. “Call me Judith,” she said, “call me the Lady of the Lake.”

Five minutes later, the woman strode out of the broken doorway again, smiling to herself, content. She had finally learned what she needed to know. It had taken her nearly two months, two long months of wandering and searching, renting empty flats just to keep those around her from becoming suspicious. Now, of course, it all made perfect sense. This was a strange, absurd time, a time when the magical world hid away in secret, unknown to the dull, unmagicced ones. Now she understood why she had been called into this time, remade in such a form, and by whom. She understood what it was she was meant to do. It was going to be a difficult task, but she would enjoy it. She would enjoy it immensely.

She crossed the footpath and found a large puddle of water near the curb. It was covered in a thin rainbow sheen of oil. She saw herself reflected in the murky water, saw her own smile. It was indeed a pretty smile, one that inspired people, made them want to help her. No wonder the great sorcerer had once fallen for it. Judith remembered it vaguely although it wasn’t her memory, not really. It was attached to this form, to the human shape she had assumed, like a note pinned to the collar of a dress. She was not the Judith that the sorcerer had once known and loved, and yet she occupied a version of that Judith’s shape, looking out of that woman’s eyes, smiling her pretty smile. The great sorcerer had indeed fallen for this smile, and had very nearly lost everything in pursuit of it.

The truth was he still might.

Judith knelt on one knee, still looking down at the puddle. She finally had what she needed. Such a common thing, really, and yet so very hard to find, at least in this benighted age. She held her hand over the puddle, formed into a fist. A dagger jutted from it, its handle encrusted with jewels, its blade dark and wet. She allowed something red to drip from the tarnished knifepoint. It pattered onto the surface of the puddle, forming ripples and making the oily sheen begin to swirl, to form cloudy shapes. Such elemental magic, she thought, and yet so rare. She understood it instinctively, of course. After all, it was how she had come to be.

“Show me,” she said to the puddle. “Show me where they are. The boy James; his brother Albus, the snake; his sister Lily, the flower; his father Harry, the legend; his mother Ginny, the torch. Show me where they are that I may seek them, and find her.”

Harvey Blagwell’s blood fanned across the puddle and the oily sheen deepened, intensified, formed a picture. The Lady of the Lake leaned close, anxious and pleased, watching the image solidify. There were forests, a lake, and then a castle, huge and sprawling, spiked with turrets and towers, glittering with windows. The image blurred, zoomed, focused, showing her what she needed to know.

Everything was clear now. Judith knew her task and where she must go. Soon, this world would be awakened, terribly and irreversibly, and chaos would follow. Judith loved chaos. She breathed it like air. She hungered for it, even now. She straightened, smoothing the faded rayon of her waitress dress, and began to walk. She would change soon, dressing herself in a manner that better suited her status. In the meantime, she was pleased. Her mission was begun. She would find the girl, and then she would simply watch.

The girl was her fate—her sister and her daughter, her nemesis and her ally. They were intertwined, inextricably and permanently. Whether she wanted to or not, the girl would help Judith. The girl would take her exactly where she needed to go.

Judith wiped the dagger, her birthright, absently on her dress as she walked. She began to hum.



1. HOGWARTS FAREWELLS

Not so very far away, the sun shone on a broad hilltop, warming the early autumn air and inspiring a vibrant chorus of cicadas in the marsh and birdsong in the nearby forest. Butterflies and bumblebees meandered and flitted, stitching invisible patterns among the flowers. The shadow of an enormous castle stretched over the face of the hilltop, its shape blurring as the wind made ripples across the overgrown lawn. A boy ran across the castle's shadow, leaving a rambling wake in the tall grass.

"What are you waiting for?" the boy, Albus Potter, called, glancing behind him.

"You're out of bounds," his brother James yelled from some distance away, cupping his hands to his mouth. "The field ended back by that big boulder, you nimrod. You can't even see the ball under all that grass."

"That's part of the challenge!" Albus called back, grinning. "Are we playing wizard football or what?"

"It's all right," a girl's voice called from some distance away. James glanced aside and saw his raven-haired cousin, Lucy, crouched in front of a stand of young trees, shuffling slowly sideways. "The goal's moved away from him. I'm trying to keep up with it, but it's a bit of a challenge. Oh,

there it goes again!" Sure enough, the saplings that formed the goal behind her seemed to sidle away across the grass, walking on their roots like very tall, woodsy squid. Lucy scuttled to keep up with them while simultaneously keeping an eye on Albus.

"I'm open, Al!" Ralph Deedle called, catching up to his friend and fellow Slytherin. He waved his hands helpfully. Albus nodded, turned, and booted at something in the grass. A threadbare football appeared momentarily as it arced through the air. Ralph squared himself to trap the ball, but it never reached him. Instead, it jigged mysteriously into the sunlight and spun away at an angle.

"Hey!" Albus and Ralph both called in unison, looking in the direction the ball was hurtling. It dropped to the ground near the feet of a red-haired girl, who ran up to it, brandishing her wand.

"Are we playing wizard football or what?" she hollered, kicking the ball toward the opposite side of the hilltop.

"Rose!" James called, running to catch up to his cousin. "Look out behind you! It's Ted!"

Rose ducked as a cloud of blue moths suddenly blew over her, conjured from the end of Ted Lupin's wand. He hooted as he ran past, aiming his foot for the ball, but she was very quick with her own wand. With a flick of her wrist and a flash, she transfigured a dead leaf into a banana peel. An instant later, Ted Lupin's foot landed on it and it squirted away beneath him, hurling him to the ground.

"Good fundamentals, Rosie!" Ron Weasley bellowed from what was, for the moment, the sidelines. "Bring it on home now! James is in the clear! Their Keeper's still fending off that Tickling Hex! Aim low!"

Rose bared her teeth grimly and kicked the ball toward James, who trapped it easily and began to maneuver it toward the outcropping of rocks that was currently serving as his team's goal. Standing before the goal, George Weasley, who was notoriously ticklish, struggled to pay attention as a large white feather darted around him, occasionally pecking at him and making him convulse with angry laughter.

James was about to shoot for goal when a voice cried out next to his ear. "Yargh! Leggo the ball! Get 'im!" Shadows fell over him and hands grabbed at his hair and cloak. James tried to bat them off without looking, but it was no use. His younger cousins, the twins Harold and Jules, circled around him on toy brooms, grabbing at him and chomping their teeth like airborne piranhas. James glanced up at them in exasperation, tripped over his own feet, and went down into the grass like a sack of bricks. Harold and Jules glanced at each other for a moment and then dove into the grass to continue their attack. The football rolled to a stop nearby as George ran forward to kick it.

"*Barricado!*" James cried, stabbing out with his wand as Harold grabbed double fists of his hair.

A tiny brick wall suddenly erupted out of the ground next to the football, a split second before George Weasley's foot came into contact with it. The ball sprang off George's foot,

immediately struck the tiny wall, and shot up into the air, arcing high over George's head. He craned his neck to watch. With a dull thud, the ball bounced between the rocks behind him.

"Goal!" James shouted, throwing both of his hands into the air.

"Cheat!" Harold and Jules called out, falling on James again and driving him to the ground.

Rose ran past James and George, reaching to scoop up the football. "The first rule of wizard football is that there are no rules," she reminded everyone, raising her voice. "James scored that one with a Barricade Charm, and I had the assist with a transfigured banana peel. That's five more points for Team Hippogriff."

"*Five* points!" Albus cried angrily, trotting to a stop nearby. "How do you figure that math?"

"One point for the goal," Rose sniffed, bouncing the ball on her right palm, "two points each for magical finesse."

"Those were *one*-point spells," Albus argued. "I could have done those in my sleep!"

"Then maybe someone should throw a Nap-a-bye Charm on you," James said, finally shooing his cousins away. "Maybe you'll play better in your dreams, eh?"

"At least I don't need any stupid baby brick walls to make *my* goals for me," Albus groused, producing his wand. "I have this crazy idea that goals are made with my feet!"

"Too bad they're so busy getting stuck in your mouth," James countered, obviously pleased with his turn of phrase. "But I can help you with that!"

Albus saw James' intention a moment before it happened. He scrambled to raise his own wand and both boys called the incantation at the exact same moment. Two bolts of magic crossed over the sunny hilltop and both Albus and James spun into the air, pulled by their ankles.

"*What* is going on here?" a female voice cried shrilly, wavering on the edge of outright fury. All eyes spun guiltily. Ginny Potter, James and Albus' mother, was striding purposely across the hilltop, approaching the gathering, her eyes blazing. Young Lily Potter followed in her wake, hiding a delighted grin behind her hands.

"I've been looking all over for the lot of you!" Ginny exclaimed. "And here I find you out in the grass making messes of yourselves in your dress robes! Ronald Weasley!" she cried, suddenly spotting her brother, who shrank away. She balled her fists. "I should have known!"

"What!" Ron cried, raising his hands. "They were bored! I was bored! I was... overseeing them, making sure they didn't get into trouble! Besides, George is out here too, if you haven't noticed!"

Ginny exhaled wearily and shook her head. "You're both as bad as the children. All of you, back to the castle this instant. Everyone's waiting. If we don't hurry we'll be late for the ceremony."

A meter above the grass, James hung upside down across from his brother. Albus met his gaze and sighed, his black hair hanging lank from his head. "I'll do you if you do me," he said. "On three."

James nodded. "One..."

"*Liberacorpus*," Ted said, flicking his wand. Both boys dropped out of the air and tumbled messily to the hillside. "You're welcome," Ted grinned, pocketing his wand. "Come on. You don't want to keep your mum waiting."

The gathering trotted to catch up to Ginny as she stalked back toward the castle gates, where a small throng had gathered, dressed, as was she, in colourful robes, hats, capes, and cloaks.

"How do I look?" James asked Rose as they crossed the lawn.

She eyed him critically. "Good," she said mournfully. "Your rolling in the dirt is no match for your mother's Laveolus Charms. Not so much as a grass stain."

James cursed under his breath. "I don't see why we need to wear these stupid dress robes anyway. Nobody even knows if a giant's wedding is a formal affair, do they? Hagrid says we're the first humans to see such a thing in forever. *He* doesn't even know how we're supposed to dress for it."

"Better safe than sorry," Ralph commented, adjusting his high, starched collar. "Especially with blokes big enough to swat you like a flobberworm."

James shook his head. "Grawp and Prechka are our friends. Er, more or less. They wouldn't *hurt* any of us."

"I'm not worried about *them*," Ralph said, his eyes widening. "I'm talking about all their family. And that King of theirs! Relations with the giant tribes are ticklish even at the best of times! You told me they even laid into Hagrid once!"

Rose shrugged. "That was a long time ago. Buck up, Ralph. I bet it's considered poor taste to kill the friends of the bride and groom."

"At least *during* the wedding," Lucy added reasonably.

As they neared the waiting witches and wizards by the courtyard gates, James saw that his dad, Harry Potter, was standing near Merlinus Ambrosius, the current Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The casual observer might have assumed that the two men were merely waiting, passing the time with idle banter, but James knew his dad better than that. The eldest Potter and the Headmaster had been spending a lot of time in discussion since yesterday evening, their voices low, their eyes roaming, watching. There was a secret sense of weighty matters and carefully unspoken fears in the air between the men, even when they were smiling. James knew what some of it was about although he didn't understand any of it very much. He only knew that whatever it was, it was the reason that everything in his life had suddenly, messily, been turned on its head, like the world's most indiscriminate *Levicorpus* jinx. He sighed angrily and looked up at the castle, soaking in the sight of it. Sunlight glimmered from the windows and glared off the blue slate of the highest turrets. Lucy fell in step next to him.

"It really is a shame, you know," she said, as if reading his thoughts.

"Don't remind me," he muttered darkly. "Tomorrow's the first day of school. We already missed the Sorting yesterday. Someone else has probably already claimed my bed in Gryffindor Tower."

"Well," Lucy replied carefully, "I hear that your bed still has the words 'whiny Potter git' burned onto the headboard, even though they don't glow anymore. So maybe that's not such a bad thing, is it?"

James nodded, not amused. "It's easy for you. You won't know what you're missing."

Lucy shrugged. "Is that better, somehow?"

"Forget it," James said, sighing. "We'll be back soon enough. Probably after Christmas holiday, like my dad says."

Lucy didn't reply this time. James glanced at her. She was two years younger than him, but in some ways she seemed older, much more mature, strangely enigmatic. Her black eyes were inscrutable.

"Lucy," a voice announced, interrupting James just as he opened his mouth to speak. He glanced aside and saw his Uncle Percy, Lucy's father, approaching, resplendent in his navy blue dress robes and mortarboard cap. "Come along now. We can't afford to be late. The usher is waiting for us. Where were you anyway? Never mind, never mind."

He put a hand around her shoulder and led her away. She glanced back at James, her expression mildly sardonic, as if to say *this is my life, aren't you jealous?* Percy rejoined his wife, Audrey, who glanced down at Lucy, registered her presence for one second, and then returned her attention to the woman standing next to her, who was dressed in a red robe and a fairly ridiculous floral hat with a live white owl nested in it. Molly, Lucy's younger sister, stood next to their mother looking bored and vaguely haughty.

James liked Molly and both of Lucy's parents although he knew them rather less than he did his Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron. Percy traveled an awful lot, due to his job at the Ministry, and he often took his wife and daughters with him when he went. James had always thought that such a life might be rather exciting—traveling to faraway lands, meeting exotic witches and wizards, staying in grand hotels and embassies—but he'd never thought it would actually happen to him. Lucy was used to it even if she didn't seem to particularly enjoy it herself; after all, she'd been accompanying her family on such trips ever since she'd been a baby, since they'd brought her home from the orphanage in Osaka, before Molly had ever been born. She'd had time to get so familiar with the routine of travel that it was virtually drudgery. James knew his cousin well enough to know that she had been looking quite forward to the consistency and pleasant predictability of her first year at Hogwarts.

Thinking that, he felt a little bad about telling her that the coming trip would be easier for her. At least he'd had two years at Hogwarts already, two years of classes and studies, dorm life and meals in the Great Hall, even if all of it had been overlaid with some fairly spectacular events. Just when Lucy had been expecting to get her first taste of such things, it had gotten neatly snatched

away from her. Considering Lucy's personality, it was easy to forget that she was, if anything, probably even more upset about it than he was.

"Welcome back, James, Albus," his father said, smiling and tousling the boys' heads. James ducked away, frowning, and ran his hand through his hair, matting it down.

"Well then," a woman's voice trilled, barely concealing her impatience. James looked toward the front of the small group and saw Professor Minerva McGonagall, her eyes ticking over them severely. "Now that we are all nominally present, shall we proceed?"

"Lead the way, Professor," Merlin said in his low, rumbling voice, bowing his head and gesturing toward the forest. "We'd hate to keep our giantish friends waiting any longer, especially on such a momentous occasion."

McGonagall nodded curtly, turned, and began to cross the lawn, striding toward the arms of the Forbidden Forest beyond. The troupe followed.

A short time later, deep in the shadow of the huge, gnarled trees, Ralph spoke up.

"I think we're nearly there," he said, his voice tight and his eyes widening. James looked up. The path curved up around a steep incline toward a rocky crest, and standing atop that crest, framed between the trees, stood a monstrous, lumpy shape. The giant was easily twenty-five feet tall, with arms that looked like a herd of swine stuffed into a tube sock and legs so thick and hairy that they appeared to take up two thirds of the rest of the body. The head looked like a small, hairy potato perched atop the creature's stubby neck. It was dressed in yards of burlap, enormous leather sandals, and a cloak made of at least a dozen bearskins. It regarded them gravely as they approached.

"Bloody hell," Ralph said in a high, wavering voice. "I knew I should have just sent a gift."



Several hours later, as the sun descended beyond the trees, casting the world into copper twilight, the troop of witches and wizards shambled back out of the Forbidden Forest, looking decidedly less crisp than they had when they'd entered. James and Ralph walked with Hagrid, who had gotten rather louder and substantially more rambling as the evening had progressed. The half-giant's footsteps meandered back and forth across the path, one huge hand each on James and Ralph's heads.

"S'for the best, o' course," Hagrid was saying mushily. "S'for... s'for... s'for the best, it is. Jus' like the Headmistress says. Where is the Headmistress? I want t' thank 'er for bein' there, for showin' 'er support for li'l Grawpy an'... an'... li'l Grawpy an' his byootiful bride."

"She's not the Headmistress anymore," Ralph said, his voice strained as Hagrid leaned uncertainly, pressing down on the boys' heads. "Not since year before last. But she's behind us. Don't worry."

"Where does th' time go?" Hagrid went on, weaving onto the grass and aiming, with some difficulty, for his hut. "Why, it only seems like yesh... yesh... yesterday that it was li'l Harry and Ron and Hermione comin' to my hut, stumblin' their way in and outta trouble, makin' mischief, helpin' me take care o' little baby Norbert. Now they're all grown, jus' like Norbert. Tha's Norberta, now, yeh unnerstand, the dragon yeh're Uncle Charlie came to check on. Awful nice of 'im to do that since he's the one what's been keepin' tabs on 'er all these years, 'specially now that she's goin' on with the two newlyweds. Yeh saw 'er jus' back there, sittin' by Grawpy's side jus' like a dog, jus' like my ol' boarhound, Fang. Did I ever tell yeh about Fang? He was a good dog. Not that I don' love Trife, mind yeh. Fang's pawprints was jus' some awful big pawprints to fill, y' know."

Under Hagrid's ponderous weight, James felt like he was being driven into the ground like a tent peg. He pried Hagrid's large meaty hand off his head and held it, pulling the half-giant toward the door of his cabin. "Norberta made a nice wedding present, Hagrid. I bet they'll all be very happy together, up in the mountains."

"Do yeh think so?" Hagrid boomed suddenly, taking his hand from Ralph's head to wipe a tear from his bloodshot eyes. "I hope so. I do. The Headmistress knows best, she does. I think I need to sit down now for a... for jus' a minnit."

Hagrid turned as if he meant to enjoy the beauty of the sunset, wobbled on his feet for one long moment, and then fell backwards onto his garden, smashing a few unusually coloured pumpkins. Immediately, he began to snore loudly.

"He'll be fine," Ralph said uncertainly. "Right?"

James shrugged, heading toward Hagrid's hut and pulling the door open. "Yeah, it's a nice night. Probably do him some good. I've never seen anyone drink so much mead though."

"I did!" Ralph countered, ambling toward the doorway. "Merlin put that stuff away like it was water! Didn't seem to affect him at all, either, not like the rest. Maybe it's some sort of special power or something."

"Maybe it's just part of being eleven hundred years old," James called from the darkness of the hut, grunting to himself. "Maybe he can, sort of, spread it all out over a lifetime, so it doesn't affect him as much at any given moment. You think?"

Ralph heaved a sigh. "I try not to, at least when it comes to Merlin. He makes my head hurt. The food was good tonight though. The chicken and kabobs and everything. I've never had whelk before, especially cooked like that."

"You mean spit-roasted by a dragon?" James replied, dragging a huge quilt through the door of the hut. "Kind of gives it a weird aftertaste, don't you think? I thought it tasted a little like the potions closet smells on a humid day."

Ralph shrugged, helping tug the quilt over Hagrid's huge snoring bulk. "There. Sleep well, Hagrid. See you next year."

"Ugh, stop saying things like that," James said, rolling his eyes.

"What?"

James shook his head. "I just don't want to be reminded. Come on, there's McGonagall. If she beats us back to the gates, she's likely to give us detention for being late even if we aren't going to be here to serve it."

The boys ran across the field at an angle, meeting the former Headmistress at the courtyard entrance. They surprised her as they came bounding up.

"Boys!" she exclaimed, blinking owlishly at them, her eyes strangely bright. "You should be inside now that the ceremony is over. It's late."

"We know, Professor... er," James said, looking up at the tall woman. "Er, are you... er?"

"I'll have you know I have allergies," McGonagall sniffed, dabbing at her eyes and striding quickly through the gates. "The babelthrush is particularly fetid this time of year, that's all. Now come."

Inside, Harry, Ginny, and the rest were milling near the doorway of the Great Hall as the candles lit themselves for the evening. Students moved through the huge open doors in knots, drifting toward the stairs and their common rooms. Lucy, Rose, and Albus met James and Ralph as they entered.

"Dad's arranged for us to have extra beds in the dormitories," Albus said, munching a biscuit he'd found in the Great Hall. "You and Lucy with the Gryffindors, me and Ralph downstairs with our own mates."

James asked, "What about Charlie and Jules and Harold and everybody else?"

"They're just going home tonight. No point in their hanging around here until tomorrow morning, is there? It's not like *they're* going anywhere."

"Ugh! Stop reminding me," Rose said, throwing up her hands. "I'm so jealous I can hardly stand it. You lot going off on some big holiday and me having to stay here and do Arithmancy and Charms and Debellow's stupid version of D.A.D.A. all year."

"But you *like* Arithmancy," Ralph said, frowning.

She sighed angrily. "Just because I'm good at it doesn't mean I like it."

"I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat," Albus griped. "It isn't like I *want* to go on this stupid trip."

"You think that makes it any better?" Rose fumed. "The injustice of it all is breathtaking."

From across the hall, Hermione's voice called to her daughter. "You and your brother should probably get upstairs, Rose. Tomorrow's first day of school. Aren't you excited?"

Rose glowered darkly at her mother, and then shared the look with James, Ralph and Albus.

Lucy patted her older cousin on the arm. "I'll take lots of pictures for you, Rose. And we'll write. Won't we?" She looked meaningfully at the boys, who muttered their assent and shuffled their feet on the dusty floor.

Rose nodded skeptically.

"*All* of you had better get up to bed, then," Harry Potter said, nodding toward his sons. "Lily will be staying with your mother and me in the Room of Requirement. We don't want to have to come and wake you lot up when it's time to leave."

Albus frowned. "When *are* we leaving?"

"I suggest we meet here by the main doors at five thirty," Harry answered, looking at the rest of the adults, who nodded agreement.

James grumbled, "This just gets worse and worse."

"It really was a beautiful wedding," Ginny sighed, ignoring James. "In its own special way. Don't you think?"

"Minerva," Harry smiled, peering closely at the older woman. "Are you...?"

"I have allergies!" McGonagall answered stridently, waving a hankie. "They make my eyes water!"

Harry nodded and put an arm around the woman's narrow shoulders, leading her toward the faculty corridors. Ginny, Ron, and Hermione followed, talking amongst themselves.

Shortly, Albus and Ralph said goodnight and drifted down the stairs toward the Slytherin cellars. James and Lucy joined Rose on the stairs, tromping their way up to the Gryffindor common room.

"*Humdrugula*," Rose called curtly as she approached the portrait of the Fat Lady. The frame swung away from the wall and the sound of raucous voices, laughter, and a crackling fire filled the hall from beyond.

"I wasn't even told the password," James mourned to Lucy as they approached the portrait hole.

"Passwords are for students only," the Fat Lady sang happily from the other side of the open frame. James rolled his eyes in annoyance.

"James!" a voice called out. "I got your bed! Isn't it cool?"

James looked and saw Cameron Creevey grinning at him from over the back of the hearth sofa, flanked by two boggling first-years. "It's got your name on it and everything. My mates are dead jealous, of course. I've been telling the new students about last year. Remember when we went

off to Hogsmeade in the tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow? Remember the wolf when we came back?"

"I remember you getting knocked out cold in the dirt," James answered unhappily. Rose poked him in the stomach with her elbow, but Cameron seemed unperturbed.

"See?" he said, turning back to the two first-years. "I told you! It was excellent."

James shook his head and joined Rose at a corner table where Ted Lupin was sitting with his former school crew. Lucy followed James, looking around with open curiosity, her face calm and watchful.

"Hey, James, Gremlin salute," Damien Damascus announced, raising his fists to either side of his head, the pinky fingers extended to form wiggling ears. Rose, Sabrina Hildegard, and Ted joined in, sticking out their tongues dutifully. James performed the salute as well, but halfheartedly.

"Things are looking a little slim for the Gremlins this year," Sabrina said, lowering her hands to the table before her, where she was folding an auger out of a page of the Daily Prophet. "What with Noah and Petra joining Ted in the fabled outside world and James running off to hobnob with his cronies in the States."

"Yeah," Damien said, raising his eyebrows derisively. "What's up with that anyway?"

James opened his mouth to reply, but Ted spoke first. "It's right here, isn't it? Front page, top of the fold." He pulled the paper out from under Sabrina's elbow and held it up for all to see. James had already seen the headline, which read, 'H. POTTER, AURORS TO JOIN INTERNATIONAL INVESTIGATIVE TASK FORCE'. Below the headline was a moving photograph of James' dad and Titus Hardcastle, standing before a podium at the Ministry while flashbulbs erupted from the crowd in front of them. The smaller headlines next to the photo read, 'MUGGLE LEADERS STILL MISSING: W.U.L.F. CLAIMS CREDIT FOR KIDNAPPINGS DESPITE MINISTRY DENIALS. FAMED NYC SKYSCRAPER DISCOVERED IN VENEZUELA, BLAMED ON "ALIENS"'.

"The whole thing's gone all international now that there's been bigwig kidnappings both here and in the States," Ted sighed, dropping the newspaper. "I don't envy your dad one bit, James. It was one thing teasing the American press into believing it was little green men that nicked their building. Getting a bunch of foreign agencies to work together is like getting horklumps to play chess."

Damien frowned askance at Ted. "How would you know about such things, Lupin?"

"I do this thing called 'reading,'" Ted said, tapping the side of his nose. "I learned it from Petra. You should try it sometime!"

"It's 'Morgan' now, remember?" Sabrina corrected without looking up. "She calls herself Morgan ever since that whole debacle at her grandparents' place."

"Talking of *which*," Ted said, sitting up in his chair, "she and the new Headmaster are having themselves a serious little chat right about now, up in his office. I heard Uncle Harry discussing it

with the old man himself, and she admitted it when I got back to the castle. Seems there's some question of whether she's going to be allowed to come along on this little jaunt of yours, Potter."

"What's that mean?" James asked, watching Ted dig something out of his robes. "She's of age now. They can't stop her if she wants to go on a trip."

"Can't they now?" Damien mused, leaning back and steepling his fingers. "I mean, there's detention, and then there's *detention*, if you know what I mean. There's some tricky legal questions, after all, what with both of her grandparents ending up dead. The Muggle police don't know much of anything, thanks to Merlin, but that hardly means everything's all sunshine and rainbows. The stuff we saw at that farm, well, let's just say it makes Professor Longbottom's Snapping Thornroot look like daffodil salad. Our Petra is one complicated little witch, if you ask me."

"That doesn't mean she's guilty of anything horrible," James said, sitting up. "She and her sister are lucky to be shut of the lot of them. Sounds to me like they were pretty rotten to both of them."

"They've been staying with you and your parents since the day they got out of there, right?" Rose asked, raising her eyebrows. "Did they tell you what happened that day?"

James sat back again, looking out over the common room. "Well, not really. She said that her grandfather had denied his wizard powers for the sake of his Muggle wife, some awful woman named Phyllis, who was just beastly. And she said that Phyllis tried to send Petra's sister Izabella off to some work farm place for people who are soft in the head. Petra told me that they did what they had to do to get out of there together."

"I guess that's close enough to the truth," Damien nodded. "Although it isn't *all* of it. That's for sure."

"What do *you* know about it?" James asked, meeting Damien's eyes.

"Not a whole lot more than you do, but I'm just saying—there was magic going on there the likes of which I've never seen. Merlin made us swear secrecy about it, which is fine by me. You probably wouldn't believe it anyway. All I know is that if Petra was doing it, then that wasn't the Petra I thought I knew."

"'Morgan,'" Sabrina corrected again, holding up her neatly folded auger. "What do you say, Lupin? You ready to go six circles with the reigning champion?"

"Not now, not now," Ted answered distractedly, producing a rather surprising amount of miscellany from his pockets and dumping it all onto the table. "There's Gremlinery afoot. Where are they, then..."

James, Lucy, and Rose leaned over the table as Ted rooted quickly through the pile of odds and ends. A dog-eared origami frog leapt out of the detritus, limping crookedly. Every Flavor Beans and loose Knuts rolled every which way. "Aha!" Ted announced triumphantly, sitting back and producing a velvet bag tied with a silver cord. "Gather 'round, comrades. This could be interesting."

Sabrina put down the auger and frowned studiously as Ted undid the bag. "Extendable Ears?" she said, peering at its contents. "How are those going to work? You said Morgan and the Headmaster were meeting in his office. That's all the way across the castle."

"Ah, ah, ah," Ted corrected, smiling mischievously. "These are the new Extendable Ears Mark II, with a Remote Sensing Hex built right in. Just mark the object you want to serve as the receiver—in this case, an innocent peppermint that I slipped into the Headmaster's pocket on the way back to the castle, and voilà—" Here, Ted Metamorphed his face into a caricature of George Weasley, proceeding with George's infectious enthusiasm, "Instant illicit audio illumination for all your eavesdropping endeavors." He changed his face back to himself and pulled a handful of pinkish shapes out of the bag. "Strictly experimental at this point, but working at the Three 'W's does have its perks."

James took one of the pink shapes as Ted handed it to him. It was made out of foam rubber and shaped like a large ear. "What do I do with it?"

"Well," Damien said, examining his critically, "I don't guess that you eat it." Experimentally, he stuck the foam ear up to his own ear and listened. His eyes widened. "It's working!" he whispered raspily. "I can hear them!"

As one, the Gremlins and Lucy clapped the ears to the sides of their heads. James discovered that the shape was fashioned to fit neatly over his own ear so that it could be worn hands-free. He jammed it on and then leaned back, frowning slightly at the distant, echoing voices he was hearing.

"Is it them?" Sabrina asked, squinting quizzically. "They're hard to make out."

Ted nodded distractedly. "It's them, they're just far away. Shut it and listen."

James strained his ears to hear over the noise of the common room. Dimly, he perceived the rumbling baritone of the Headmaster, and then the tremulous tenor of Petra's response. Slowly, faintly, the voices became clear.

"Unfortunate as it was, I am less concerned about the way in which you chose to exercise your powers," the Headmaster was saying, "than I am about your more recent dreams. I have come to believe that such things often have implications we do not immediately comprehend."

"It's just a dream," Petra answered, her voice tiny and distant. "It's a lot like some others that I've had, only the other way around. I used to dream of decisions I thought I wanted to change. Now, I'm dreaming of disasters I barely avoided. I'm a little glad of them, really. They remind me."

Merlin's voice came again, calm and measured. "What do they remind you of?"

"Of the power of choices. And the fact that the simplest actions can have enormous consequences."

Merlin's voice lowered meaningfully. "And you know now how very true this is for you, in particular, don't you, Ms. Morganstern? Or would you prefer me to call you by your *other* name?"

There was a long pause. James had begun to wonder if the Extendable Ear had stopped working when the Headmaster's voice became audible again.

"Grundlewort ganache popovers," he said slowly, as if tasting the words. James looked up, his brow furrowed. Lucy met his gaze, frowned, and shook her head slightly. The voice of Merlinus went on, low and quiet, so that James had to strain his ears to hear. He leaned over the table, hunching his shoulders in concentration.

"Use only powdered grundlewort, dried and well-sifted, to avoid an overly pungent aroma. Mix with two parts huiverte extract and a pinch of tea blossom petal. Add rum three drops at a time until damp enough to knead..."

James looked aside and saw Ted staring furiously at the table in front of him, the oversized foam ear jutting from the side of his head. He noticed James' look and shrugged.

"Sounds like a recipe," Damien whispered. "Why's he teaching Petra how to make popovers?"

"Because," Merlin's voice boomed, so loud that James exclaimed in surprise and clambered at his Extendable Ear, "popover preparation is a valuable life skill that all witches and wizards should aim to perfect."

James succeeded in clawing the foam shape off his ear, turned, and recoiled at the sight of the Headmaster standing right next to him, a very large cookbook open in his hands. Merlin was smiling, but it was not the sort of smile one felt instinctively comfortable sitting beneath.

"After all," the Headmaster said, eyeing the foam ears scattered around the table, "one never knows when the need might arise for an unexpected treat. Which reminds me..." He retrieved something from the depths of his robes and held it out over the table. "I believe this belongs to you, Mr. Lupin. I'll just, er, add it to the pile." He dropped the charmed peppermint onto the mess of Ted's pocket contents.

"And a good evening to you, Headmaster," Damien said, recovering and smiling hugely. "Did you enjoy the wedding, sir?"

"Save your efforts, Mr. Damascus," Merlin replied, snapping the cookbook shut in his hand. "I have every suspicion that you will require them later in the term. Good evening, students, Mr. Lupin."

He turned to go, passing Petra as she entered through the portrait hole. Merlin nodded at her meaningfully, and she returned the gesture, somewhat reluctantly.

"So was any of what we just heard for real?" Ted asked as Petra joined them, squeezing in between James and Lucy on the bench side of the table.

"Depends on when you started listening," she said, avoiding his gaze. "He started fogging you right about the time we were heading back to the common room. Merlin likes to walk while he talks, you know."

Ted nodded somberly. James knew that Ted had been part of the group that had rescued Petra from her grandparents' farm, and he knew that Damien was right in saying that there was a lot more to that story than the rest of them knew. Merlin had spoken to everyone involved with the escape from Petra's grandparents, but all of those involved had been very secretive about it since.

Something unspoken seemed to go between Ted and Petra as he reached across the table to collect the Extendable Ears.

Rose perked up. "So, are they going to let you go along on the trip to the States, Petra?"

"Morgan," Sabrina corrected again, glancing around.

"It's all right," Petra said, laughing a little. "I'm still Petra to all of you. Morgan is more of a... personal identity."

Damien nodded. "Sort of like that guy in that band, Shrieker and the Shacks, who changed his name from Uriah Hollingsworth to just Dûm. Sort of an attitude thing, right?"

"Shut it, Damien," Rose commented, giving him a shove. "So are you going to the States or what, Petra?"

"I'm going," Petra nodded. "Izzy's coming with me. And I think we're going to stay there for awhile."

"You mean longer than Christmas break?" James asked. "Because that's when we're coming back, hopefully."

"I don't think even we will be back by Christmas, James," Lucy said apologetically. "I have some idea of how these things happen, sadly enough."

"And who is this refreshingly pragmatic creature?" Damien said brightly, leaning toward Lucy.

James deflated, but only a little, considering his proximity to Petra. "My cousin, Lucy," he answered. "She was supposed to be starting here this year, although she thinks she'd have been a Ravenclaw, or even a Slytherin."

"I could see that," Damien nodded. "She has that look, 'round about the eyes. Pleased to meet you, Cousin Lucy."

"Likewise," Lucy replied, nodding with practiced diplomacy.

"So tell us how this all came about, then," Ted said, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms. "I mean, Hogwarts is a boarding school. You don't *need* to go with your parents to the States even if they're going to be there all year. Right?"

James sighed and leaned on his elbows. "It was Mum's idea," he began. "She didn't want to be so far away from Albus and me for so long. She was right upset when the owl came with Dad's instructions, straight from the Minister himself. I mean, things have been pretty humdrum in the Auror Department for quite a while now. It's like Professor Longbottom said to my dad once: peace is a pretty boring thing for an Auror, you know? I think the family just got used to it all. Now that things seem to be, sort of, heating up out in the world..." James spread his hands over the table, palms up.

"Whole city blocks being Disapparated away and chucked into waterfalls does tend to put people on edge," Damien nodded wisely.

"My mum's acting the same as yours, James," Rose said. "I hear her and Dad talking. They say it's a scary time because too many people have forgotten what things were like back when You-Know-Who was still alive. They get tolerant of all sorts of iffy ideas, start questioning the way the whole wizarding world works."

"Like Tabitha Corsica and her bloody Progressive Element," Ted scoffed. "And don't think *they've* gone away either. Not by a long shot. They're like bugs that have retreated into the walls. They'll come back, and when they do, there'll be a lot more of them."

Sabrina picked up the paper again and peered at the headlines. "Is that who this Wulf bloke is involved with, you think?"

"Wulf isn't a bloke, Sabrina," Ted said, pointing at the headline. "It's an organization."

"The Wizard's United Liberation Front," Lucy said carefully. "I've seen some of their posters up around London, talking about equality at any cost and such things. Supposedly they're international, thousands in numbers, but my father says not. He says they are probably just a few kooks in a cellar somewhere."

"Why would they go and pretend to kidnap some Muggle politicians if it wasn't true?" Rose asked, shaking her head and looking around the table. "I mean, even if it *was* true, why would they do it?"

"I don't know," James answered, scowling. "And I don't care. All I know is, it's getting everybody all up in a snit, and now my dad has to go work on some big international task force, and Mum's worried that something will happen to him, or us, or everybody. Dad says he *could* wrap the whole thing up by Christmas, but Lucy's probably right. Nobody knows how long it'll last. As long as it does, Mum wants us all to be together, or at least on the same continent."

"But Deedle's going with you, right?" Ted said, looking at James. "His dad's already been over there once, visiting Stonewall and Franklyn and everybody at Alma Aleron, checking out their security and Muggle repellent techniques, that sort of thing. Is that why he's going along this time?"

"I guess," James answered, slumping again. "I don't know."

"Well," Lucy said, climbing off her end of the bench, "if *any* of us are going, we'd better get upstairs to bed. Show me the way, Rose?"

Rose got up to join her cousin, and the rest of the Gremlins stirred, stretching and squeaking as chairs were pushed away from the table.

"What about you, Petra?" Damien asked, turning his attention to the girl across from him. "What's over there for you?"

James watched Petra, who smiled slightly at Damien and shrugged. "I don't know," she answered, and then sighed disconsolately, looking around the common room. "What's over *here* for me?"



James awoke the next morning to a scratching at the window next to his bed. He sat up, buried deep in the fog of sleep, and wondered for several moments where in the world he was. Dark shapes hulked around him, thick with the silence of night. A single candle burned nearby, but James couldn't see it over the four-poster bed next to him. Something tapped the window, startling him, and he spun blearily, straining his eyes in the dark. Nobby, James' barn owl, stood on the other side of the glass, hopping up and down impatiently.

"What do you want?" James whispered crossly as he opened the window. Nobby hopped in and extended his foot, showing James the small note attached to his leg by a twine knot. James pulled the knot loose and unrolled the strip of parchment.

*Awake yet? I thought not. Meet us by the rotunda doors in ten minutes.
We'll have breakfast on the ship.*

—Mum

James balled up the note and dropped it onto the bed. Clumsily, he got up and began to change out of his pyjamas.

"Looking forward to your little holiday, Potter?" a voice drawled quietly. James startled, hopping on one leg as he pulled on his jeans, and fell over onto his mattress. Nobby jumped back onto the windowsill and flapped his wings, bristling.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy," James breathed, shaking his head. "Don't you ever sleep?"

"I'm just a tiny bit jealous," Scorpius Malfoy mused from where he sat, leaning against his headboard with the single candle lit on his bedside table. He lowered the book he'd been reading and peered over his glasses. "And yet *you* don't seem to be looking forward to this in the least. I find it hard to believe you'll miss not making the Quidditch team again *that* much."

James had grown used to Scorpius' backhanded conversational style. He sighed, hoisted his jeans the rest of the way up and reached for his trainers. "Maybe. I don't know."

"I have a sneaking suspicion, Potter," Scorpius said, apparently returning his attention to the book on his lap. "Would you like me to share it with you?"

James knotted his shoe vigorously. "Is there any way I can get you not to?"

"I think you aren't as grumpy about going on this trip as you're letting on," Scorpius said quietly. "And for obvious reasons."

James nodded curtly. "That Malfoy intuition of yours kicking in? Maybe you'll tell me my lucky lotto numbers too."

"Petra Morganstern is accompanying you and your family, isn't she?" Scorpius said, finally closing his book. "She and her Muggle sister?"

"Yeah," James answered, stuffing his pyjamas into the duffle bag and zipping it up. "So?"

"Come now, Potter, it's no secret how you feel about her. When she sat down next to you last night in the common room your face turned so red we could have roasted chestnuts on it."

"Shut up," James rasped, mortified. "You're crazy!"

"I'm just stating the obvious," Scorpius said, shrugging. "It's not a bad thing. She's a very fetching girl, if you ask me. I just think you ought to be careful."

"Yeah, I know," James muttered, somewhat mollified. "Rose already warned me. I shouldn't say anything stupid to ruin the friendship. I know. I'm not a complete idiot."

"That's not what I'm thinking of," Scorpius said, meeting James' eyes. "Personally, I don't give a newt for your friendship with Petra Morganstern. There are more important things at work in the world, if you haven't noticed."

"I've noticed," James said, frowning at the blonde boy. "But what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Maybe nothing," Scorpius answered, narrowing his eyes. "You're... you. But you've managed to be involved in some other fairly spectacular world events over the last two years, sometimes for the better, and sometimes not. Fate seems to enjoy placing you Potters right onto the bull's-eyes of history. I'm just saying, it might be a good idea to try not to be too... *distracted* if that should happen again."

James shook his head wearily and hefted his bag. "This isn't my adventure this time," he said, crossing the circular room. "This time, it's all Dad's."

"So you keep saying," Scorpius replied, raising his eyebrows sardonically.

"See you later, Scorpius," James said, stopping at the top of the stairs. "I hope."

"Bon voyage, Potter," the boy said, dismissing James and opening his book again. "Remember what I said."

James frowned quizzically at the boy, but that seemed to be all Scorpius had to say. Shrugging, James turned and trotted down the stairs.

"Your cousin Lucy's already left," a far-off, wispy voice commented from the hearth sofa. James saw the ghost of Cedric Diggory seated there. "I was supposed to come up and wake you if Nobby wasn't able to do it."

"Thorough bunch, aren't they?" James said, but he couldn't help smiling. Scorpius was right. Now that it was finally happening, he was becoming rather excited about it.

"Have fun, James," Cedric nodded, meeting James' smile. "I always wanted to see the States, back when I was alive. Tell us all about it when you come back."

"I will, Ced. See you!"

The portrait swung open easily, and when James closed it behind him, he heard the soft whistle of the Fat Lady's snore. He looked back at her from the dark corridor. There would be no common room passwords for him this year, he thought, testing the fact to see if it still panged him as much as it had the previous night. There would be no D.A.D.A. classes with Professor Debellows and his horrid Gauntlet, no dinners in the Great Hall under the floating candles and the enchanted ceiling. None of Peeves' nasty pranks or Professor McGonagall's steely glares. No weekend teas with Hagrid in his hut.

It was sad, of course, but not as sad as he'd thought it would be. Because there would be new things to experience instead, at least for this year. He didn't know what they'd be, but unsurprisingly, that was a rather large part of the excitement. Maybe not all of it would be fun, but it would at least be noteworthy, and when he returned, everyone would be dying to hear all about it. Especially Rose, and Cedric, and even Scorpius. He puffed out his chest a little, taking in the darkened, sleepy corridor, the portrait of the Fat Lady, and all of Hogwarts beyond. He almost said goodbye to the school, and then thought that'd be a little silly. Instead, he turned and fairly ran down the stairs, taking two at a time.

He was very nearly to the rotunda entrance, could even hear the dim babble of his fellow travelers' voices echoing from up ahead, when a figure moved in the dim shadows, jingling faintly. To James' surprise, he recognized Professor Sybil Trelawney.

"Ah, James," she said tremulously. "Off on your grand adventure to the colonies, I see. I am glad of the opportunity to say fare-thee-well and bonne chance. May your voyage avoid the ravages of the many fates that always lurk the depths, preying upon the unwary."

"Thanks, Professor," James replied. "Uh, I guess. What are you doing awake at this hour?"

Trelawney drew a great, dramatic sigh. "Oh, I need very little sleep these days. Age takes its toll. But don't let me detain you. Your fellow sojourners await..."

She patted James lightly on the shoulder as he passed her, her wrist bangles jingling merrily. Suddenly, James stopped in his tracks, nearly dropping his bag. He peered aside and saw the professor's hand clamped onto his shoulder, gripping it so tightly that her purple fingernails virtually disappeared into his sweatshirt. He glanced up at Trelawney, but she wasn't looking at him. She stared straight ahead, her eyes wide and unfocused, as if she had suddenly been turned into a statue.

"Professor?" James asked, furrowing his brow worriedly. "Are you all right?" In the distance, James could still hear the voices of his family and friends, echoing in the high vaults of the rotunda.

"I see a world on fire," Trelawney said conversationally. She didn't seem to be talking to James or even to herself. Her words hung in the air almost like they had lives of their own, like solid

things just outside the limits of human vision. James shivered, and yet her hand held him like a vice, as immobile as stone.

"Worlds upon worlds, stretching away into forever," she said, her voice becoming dreamy, singsong. "All linked back to one place, the crux, the fulcrum, the axle upon which every reality turns. It is wobbling, leaning, falling... it is shattered, and with it go all things and all times."

"Er, Professor...?" James breathed, trying to pry Trelawney's hand from his shoulder. Truthfully, he barely felt the pain of her grip. Her words were like poison smoke. He was afraid to breathe, for fear that her voice would get into him and infect him, and grow into something unspeakable.

"There is only one," she mused, her voice changing, deepening. "One who stands on the nexus of destinies, one whose hand can preserve the balance or knock it into oblivion. The power is not in his hands, but in the hand of whom he shepherds. There is only one outcome. The fates have aligned. Night will fall, and from it, there will be no dawn, no dawn, save the dawn of forever fire, the demon light of worlds burning, consuming, the light in which there is no life. Goodnight. Goodnight. Goodnight." She repeated the word rhythmically, eerily, like a scratched record.

James shivered violently. Finally, the professor's hand came loose from his shoulder, wrenched free as she fell forward, toppling full length like a tree. James scrambled to catch her, and she fell partially upon him. She was so light, so festooned with bangles, jewelry, and coloured shawls, that it was like being fallen on by a thrift store mannequin.

"Professor?" James gasped, struggling to roll her over. She was as stiff and cold as a plank of wood. He shook her. "Professor Trelawney?" She stared up at the dark ceiling, her eyes boggling blindly behind her spectacles, which had been knocked askew on her face. James was terrified. He filled his lungs to call for help, but at that moment, the professor convulsed before him. She inhaled desperately, filling her narrow chest and flailing her arms, struggling to sit up. James grasped one of her cold hands and tugged her shoulder with his other hand, pulling her upright.

"Goodness me," Trelawney wheezed, her voice an octave higher than normal. "What has become of me, fainting dead away right here on the corridor floor. My apologies, Mr. Potter, I do hope I didn't alarm you..."

James helped the professor to her feet, and peered at her face suspiciously, his heart still pounding in his chest. She seemed not to remember what had happened or any of her strange words, but James felt almost certain that she knew *something* had happened. She glanced at him, fanning herself, and then looked away.

"I'll be just fine, James, my boy," she said faintly. "Please, go on, go on..." She seemed either unwilling or unable to look directly at him.

"Professor," James said slowly, "are you sure you're... I mean, what did all of that mean?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, young man," she admonished, as if he had suggested something slightly dirty. "Off with you now. Your family awaits."

"I could walk you to your rooms, Professor," James offered, stepping forward and reaching for Trelawney's elbow.

"No!" she nearly shrieked, snatching her elbow away from him. She struggled to moderate her tone. "No. Of course not. Just go. Please."

James peered up at her face, his eyes wide, worried. "It was about someone who's going on this trip, wasn't it?"

Trelawney sighed hugely, shakily turning to lean against the wall and fanning herself with the end of a mauve scarf. "There are those who laugh at me," she said, as if to herself. "They don't believe in the cosmic harmonics. They doubt that I am one of its rare vessels." She tittered a little madly, apparently forgetting that James was even there. He began to back away, half afraid to leave the professor alone, but knowing his fellow travelers were waiting for him. Trelawney didn't look up at him, but continued to mutter nervously to herself, her face lost in the shadows of the corridor. Finally, shaking his head, James turned and began to run, following the distant voices from the rotunda.

"It was you, James," Trelawney's voice said blankly, stopping him in his tracks. "It will surprise no one that I have had very few true revelations in my life. Rarely do I remember them, nor is this time any exception, but for one thing: I saw you. You are the one. You are the instrument, but not the tool. You will shepherd the one who will bring down the darkness. Even now... even now..." Her voice had gone flat, resigned and dead.

James turned slowly to look back over his shoulder. Trelawney stood right where he'd left her, leaning against the wall, indistinct in the shadows.

"You're confused. My dad was the Chosen One. Not me. It was his job to save the world."

She shook her head slowly, and then laughed again. It was a thin hopeless sound. "Your father was indeed the chosen one. His task is finished. Now, the universe demands payment, and that payment will come by your hand. It is done. You cannot escape your destiny, any more than your father could his."

"I don't believe that," James heard himself say. "Nothing is unchangeable. Whatever this *payment* is, I'll fight it."

"I know you will," she said slowly, so sadly that it nearly broke James' heart. "I know you will. But you will fail, dear boy. You will fail..." She exhaled on the last word, turning it into a long diminishing note, fading into the darkness. James shivered violently.

"James?" a voice called. It was his dad, Harry Potter. "Is that you? We need to move along, son."

James glanced along the corridor and saw shadows approaching, growing longer in the torchlight.

"I'm coming, Dad," he called. "I just... I ran into somebody. We were saying goodbye... She's still—"

He turned around again, pointing, but Trelawney was gone. In the predawn darkness of the corridor, there was no sign of her whatsoever.



2. THE GWYNDEMER

James couldn't remember the last time he had been awake at such an early hour. The sun was barely a rose-grey suggestion on the horizon, leaving the rest of the sky scattered with faint stars and high clouds, frosted with moonlight. Mist rose from the school grounds and the grass was so wet that James could feel it through his trainers.

"Good morning, James," Izzy, Petra's sister, announced cheerfully, moving alongside him as the travelers made their way into the pearly dawn gloom. "It's exciting, isn't it?"

"It is, actually," James agreed, smiling at the younger girl as she skipped next to him, her blonde curls bouncing around her face. Izzy was a year older than James' sister, Lily, but it was a little hard to remember that. Where Lucy tended to strike people as older than she really was, Izabella Morganstern had a simple innocence that made her seem rather younger. Petra had explained to James and his family that Izzy had been born with some sort of learning disability, one that had earned her the disdain of her own mother and very nearly doomed her to a life of dull servitude at the woman's cold hand. James didn't think that Izzy seemed slow, exactly. On the contrary, it was almost as if her brain was simply blissfully unencumbered by the sorts of nagging worries that left most people grumpy and irritable. James envied her a little bit.

"Petra didn't want to get up when I tried to wake her," Izzy said in a stage whisper, nodding toward her sister, who was walking some distance away, near Percy and Audrey. "She says she's not a morning person."

James nodded. "I'm not either, usually. But this is different, isn't it?"

"It's not like getting up for a day of work on the farm or anything dull like that," Izzy agreed, grabbing James' hand and skipping merrily. "We're off on a grand adventure! We're going for a ride on a ship, just like Treus. Aren't we?"

"Raise ye forth thy wands and wits," Albus commented from somewhere behind James. "Right 'Treus'?"

"So how are we getting there, then?" Ralph piped up. James turned to see the bigger boy walking alongside Albus, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his hooded sweatshirt. "Portkey? I've always wanted to travel by Portkey. Is it that stump over there?"

"You see who's leading this little expedition, don't you Ralph?" James replied, nodding toward the front of the group.

Ralph squinted. "Yeah. It's Merlin," he said, and then slumped as realization struck him. "Oh."

Albus peered ahead at the Headmaster. "What's that mean, then?"

"It means we're walking," James answered, grinning. "Merlin likes to commune with the secret whatsits of nature whenever he gets the chance, don't you know."

Ralph sighed. "Why's he even coming anyway?"

"Simple," a new voice answered. James glanced up to see Ralph's father, Denniston Dolohov, walking nearby, his cheeks flushed in the pearly light that sifted down through the trees of the Forbidden Forest. "Back in his time, nobody knew anything about the 'New World', although lots of wizards and witches suspected its existence. He's coming along for a few days before heading back to Hogwarts. I expect he wants to take a look around and see what life is like on the other side of the pond. It'd be like one of us traveling to the distant future and being offered a chance to visit cities on the moon."

"Now *that* would be cool," Albus sighed. "Much better than being carted off to stupid old America."

"I'd be careful with talk like that," Lucy said. James glanced aside and saw her walking on the other side of Izzy, her duffle bag slung over one shoulder. "I understand that Americans can be fiercely proud of their country. Not unlike some of us, of course."

"Well, it's easy for us, isn't it?" Albus exclaimed. "I mean, we've got ourselves loads of history and traditions, going back thousands of years! They've got, what? About fifteen minutes and a tea party?"

"Speaking of tea," Ralph said, rubbing his stomach, "I could use a bite."

As if on cue, James' mother drifted back from the front of the group. "Biscuits, anyone?" she said, carrying an open tin.

James shouldered his bag and grabbed with both hands. "Thanks, Mum."

"Ah! Shortbread," Izzy exclaimed happily. "We hardly ever got shortbread at home!"

"Merlinus says a little nourishment is needed for the journey," Ginny commented, nodding. "After all, we've got a lot to do and a long way to go."

"And we're walking the entire way?" Albus asked around a mouthful of biscuit. "Seriously?"

Ginny nodded. "Merlin sent all of our trunks ahead yesterday afternoon. They'll be waiting for us at the port. A little exercise will do you some good."

"Maybe it'll help you grow a bum," Lucy suggested helpfully.

"Hah hah," Albus chimed sarcastically. "So how long is this going to take anyway?"

"Yeah," Ralph huffed, peering up at the trees as they passed overhead. "What if any of us, you know, faints from hunger or something along the way?"

"We're here," a voice called from the front. To James' surprise, he recognized it as belonging to Neville Longbottom. "Everybody stay close now."

Albus boggled. "We're *here*?"

"Is that Professor Longbottom?" Ralph frowned, puzzled. "I mean, fun's fun, but shouldn't *somebody* be staying back home to run Hogwarts?"

James, who'd been on one of Merlin's magical walking trips in the past, grinned. Still clutching a biscuit in one hand, he ran ahead, joining the adults near the front of the group.

"Hi Uncle Percy, Aunt Audrey, Molly," he called as he passed. "Hi Petra. Good morning." He darted past her and slowed down as he found his dad, Merlin, and Neville Longbottom walking at the head of the troop. Sure enough, as James looked around, he could see that the trees here looked different. They were no longer the enormous old growth of the Forbidden Forest. These were young trees, choked with weeds and moss, leaning in the shifting wind. The air smelled briny and damp.

"Good morning, James," Neville said, smiling down at him. "Excited?"

"I am!" James agreed, meeting Neville's smile. "Why are you coming along? If you don't mind me asking."

"Professor Longbottom has come at my request, Mr. Potter," Merlin answered, striding easily down a winding, rocky path. "Besides, even Herbology teachers deserve the occasional holiday. Even if it is a *working* holiday."

"The Alma Alerons have asked me to give a lecture," Neville admitted sheepishly. "I was recommended to their Flora Department by Ben Franklyn himself. It seemed an opportunity not to miss."

"Wands away, everyone," Harry commented mildly. James looked up as the trees thinned and fell behind them. He could see now that they were on the outskirts of a small crowded fishing village. The morning sky was low and dull, packed with clouds over the rooftops. Smoke drifted listlessly from dozens of chimneys and the streets were wet, their cobbles shining dully. The group tramped their way single file down the curving, stony path until it met the street. An old man with a

grizzled white beard was seated on a stool nearby, stooped beneath the awning of a fish shop. He pushed the brim of his cap up with a horny thumb as the group filed past.

"Good morning," Harry Potter said cheerfully.

"Lovely day for a stroll, isn't it then?" Ginny added, bringing up the rear.

"Nice town you've got here," Albus cried, turning around and walking backwards, smiling at the man. "Smells a bit funny, but we won't hold it against you!"

Ginny grabbed him by the arm, spinning him around.

The narrow street descended in a series of sharp switchbacks, passing crowded houses and shops, and eventually emptying out at the seashore. Wharves, docks, and piers festooned the coastline, making a haphazard silhouette against the steely sky. Some of the slips were occupied with rusting fishing boats, others with immaculate touring yachts, still others with enormous, looming cargo ships. Green waves smacked at the hulls, lifting and dropping them monotonously. Merlin whistled as he walked, leading the group along a warped boardwalk, passing ship after ship. Workers in heavy coats and dark woolen caps barely looked up as the group passed by, ogling and wide-eyed.

"What kind of ship will we be going in?" Izzy asked, her voice full of wonder. "Will it be one of the big ones?"

"Probably not one of the big ones," Petra answered with a smile in her voice.

"Is it a cruise ship?" Ralph mused hopefully. "They have buffets on cruise ships."

The crew walked on and on. The sun finally began to burn away the dense clouds and became a hard white ball on the horizon, casting its reflection onto the ocean in a long blinding stripe.

"Here we are," Merlin finally announced. They had reached the end of the boardwalk. It was virtually deserted, overshadowed by a rocky promontory decked with a very antiquated lighthouse. James was surprised to see his grandfather's old Ford Anglia parked near the end of the boardwalk, its engine idling smoothly.

Albus frowned quizzically. "What's Granddad's car doing here?"

Ginny replied distractedly. "Go help your father unload now. Hurry, all of you."

"Unload what?" Ralph asked as she herded them forward.

Merlin produced his staff, which always seemed to be with him, hidden somewhere just out of sight despite its rather impressive size. He tapped it on the boardwalk and the Anglia's boot popped open.

"Ah," Ralph said, answering his own question. "Manual labor."

"Cool!" Albus crowed, running forward. "It's got all of our trunks in it. Did you send it ahead all by itself? Can it drive on its own?"

"It was your grandfather who taught it that particular skill," Merlin replied, smiling. "The more I learn about him, the more impressed I become. Put the trunks right here on the boardwalk, if you please. I will alert the portmaster of our arrival."

"But where's the ship?" James asked, glancing around the deserted pier below.

Merlin either didn't hear him or chose not to answer. He strolled ponderously up the crooked, curving staircase that led to the door of the lighthouse.

"Hop to it, men," Harry cried heartily, reaching into the boot and heaving out one of the trunks. As with many wizard spaces, the boot was rather larger inside than would have seemed possible from without. Eventually, James, Albus, and Ralph stood next to a precariously stacked tower of trunks, cases, crates, and bags.

"Good thing I had that biscuit," Ralph breathed, wiping his brow. "Merlin was right. Traveling is hard work."

James glanced up at the lighthouse, looking to see what the Headmaster was up to. As he watched, the small door in the side of the lighthouse opened. Merlin strode out, his head lowered as he traversed the narrow, leaning stairway.

"Hold tight, everyone," he announced. "Prepare to board."

Behind him, a loud, low note suddenly sounded, emanating from the lighthouse's high lantern. It was a singularly lonely sound, echoing long and deep over the water. James recognized it as the sound of a foghorn. When the sound finally died away, chasing its echoes over the distant waves, a beam of light appeared from the decrepit lighthouse. Ginny gasped at the brilliance of it as it speared out into the gloomy morning, seeming to extend all the way to the horizon. Slowly, the beam began to turn.

James stumbled. He grabbed out and clutched a handful of Ralph's sweatshirt, only then noticing that Ralph was staggering as well. The two of them clambered backwards against the Anglia.

"What's happening?" Albus called.

"Stand fast, landlubbers," Uncle Percy laughed, holding onto his wife Audrey and daughter Molly. "You just haven't gotten your sea legs yet."

"Watch," Lucy announced, pointing toward the lighthouse's beam.

James watched. Strangely, it seemed as if the beam was, against all probability, standing perfectly still. It was the world itself that was revolving, pulled around in a long smooth axis by the anchor of the spotlight's beam.

"There," Harry announced. "Our ship appears to be coming in."

James followed his father's gaze and saw a long sleek boat appearing from around the rocky promontory. Like the beam of light, the ship appeared to be standing perfectly still as the ocean revolved beneath it, sending its waves up beneath the bow and turning them into briny foam. The ship was long and sleek, with a polished wooden hull stained deep brown, festooned with glittering

brass portholes and fittings, tall, complicated masts and a single black smokestack jutting up from the center. Painted white letters along the prow proclaimed the name of the ship: *Gwyndemere*.

Ponderously, the pier angled toward the ship until it pointed directly at it. Figures moved about on the deck of the ship, shouting to each other and manning the rigging. James grinned as one of the deckhands heaved a length of rope over the side, Disapparated from the deck, and then Reapparated on the pier seconds later to retrieve the rope as it thumped onto the planks. He looped it industriously around an iron bollard, anchoring the *Gwyndemere* to shore. That accomplished, the beam of light ceased turning and switched off. James stumbled again as the world seemed to shudder into place.

"Everyone aboard," Percy called, striding down onto the pier, clutching his hat to his head as the wind picked up. "We've got a schedule to keep."

Merlin nodded approvingly, and then leaned toward the Anglia's driver's side window. He seemed to tell the car something, patted it lightly, and then stood back as it began to roll. It performed a neat three-point turn on the end of the boardwalk, and then puttered serenely away, its windows reflecting the low sky.

"I hope I packed enough socks," Ralph commented, watching the Anglia amble away. "I'd hate to run out of socks."

"I bet they have socks in America," Albus replied, smacking the bigger boy on the shoulder. "Let's risk it, eh?"

James smiled and followed his family down onto the pier, enjoying the sound of the waves and the misty breeze. Gulls circled overhead and alighted on the waves around the ship, where they bobbed like corks. More deckhands Apparated onto the pier, moving economically toward the stack of baggage, which they began to lug toward the ship.

A gangway appeared, steep and narrow, connecting the ship to the end of the pier. James couldn't be sure if the gangway had grown out of the pier or extended down from the ship. Either option seemed just as likely. He ran ahead, chased closely by Lucy, Izzy, and Petra, who was laughing with delight.

Once aboard, James looked around with unabashed wonder. From the deck, the *Gwyndemere* seemed simultaneously huge and cozy. Its bow and stern decks were separated by two recessed walkways, one on either side of the ship, accessed by stairs at the front and back. The walkways enclosed a high, long deckhouse, which dominated the center of the ship, fronted with the pilothouse. James could see men in white jackets and caps inside, moving busily about. An enormous ship's wheel turned gently back and forth as waves rocked the ship.

"This is so cool," Ralph said, approaching James. "I've never been on a ship before. Do you think a magical ship is any different than a regular ship?"

"You're asking the wrong mate, Ralph," Albus commented. "We're just as new to this as you are. Ask Uncle Percy if you want a real answer. Or Cousin Lucy, for that matter."

"I've only ever traveled by ship once before, believe it or not," Lucy said, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. "And that was a lot smaller than this one, on the way to Greece."

"Have you seen the dining galley yet?" Petra called from the stairs to the lower level. "Breakfast is all laid out, and it's perfectly lovely! Come and join us!"

"They have currant buns!" Izzy added importantly, cupping her hands to her mouth.

James, Albus, Ralph, and Lucy ran to the stairs and ducked into a doorway at the bottom, which opened onto a long low room with windows on either side, letting in the watery morning light. Two long tables dominated the room, bordered on both sides by wooden swivel chairs. Silverware, crystal glasses, china plates and steaming silver tureens and platters were spread over the tables.

"This is more like it!" Ralph exclaimed, pulling off his sweatshirt in the warmer quarters. He strode along the nearer table and took a seat next to his father, who was already stirring a cup of tea.

"Enjoy it while you can, friends," Denniston Dolohov proclaimed. "This is what it's like to travel on the Ministry's Sickle." Beyond him, the rest of the adults were seating themselves as well, sighing happily and removing their traveling cloaks and hats.

"The chairs are bolted to the floor," Albus said, swiveling his experimentally.

"In case of storms," Lucy nodded, speaking around a mouthful of muffin. "Can't have everything slamming all over the place if the sea gets tetchy."

Ralph looked up, his brow furrowed. "Is that likely to happen, do you think?"

Lucy shrugged. "It's the Atlantic ocean. Tetchy is sort of a habit."

"Especially this time of year," Albus agreed, reaching for a platter of toast.

James nodded gravely. "We may have to steam right through a hurricane or two. And icebergs."

"And sea monsters," Izzy added wisely, meeting Lily's eyes and stifling a grin. "Giant squid with tentacles like trolley cars!"

"Ah," Ralph said, rolling his eyes. "Sarcasm, then. I see how it is."

"Don't worry, Ralph," Petra soothed. "We've got Merlin with us. If any sea monsters attack, he'll just talk them into joining us for the trip."

"Or vanquish them and cook them for dinner," Lily said, grinning.

A little while later, James had finished his breakfast and discovered he was too excited to sit still any longer. The adults made their way below-decks to explore their cabins while most of the children scrambled back up to the foredeck to enjoy the brightening sun and the misty stamp of the bow on the waves.

"What's making us move, I wonder?" Izzy asked, squinting up at the masts.

James looked as well, noticing that all of the sails were furled tightly, lashed to the masts in neat bundles.

"Good question," Albus agreed, frowning. "I guess we're being powered somehow. Look at the smokestack."

Sure enough, a steady stream of black smoke was issuing from the smokestack's high, black funnel. James shrugged, turning back to the ocean view.

"Coal, you think?" Ralph mused. "I wouldn't have expected that."

"Maybe it's a magical fire," Lily replied reasonably. "One that doesn't need any fuel or anything."

Lucy nodded. "Like goblin's spark. That'd make sense."

Wind capered over the ship, pushing in from the ocean and whipping James' hair around his head. He grinned into it, and then turned and leaned on the railing, looking toward the shore as it crept alongside the ship. The *Gwyndemere* was passing the other docks and piers still, and James watched the dozens of ships where they clustered along the bank, dizzying in their sizes and variety. Workers thronged amongst them, moving on the piers and gangways, silent in the distance. Finally, the *Gwyndemere* began to angle away from the shore, and the wharves and enormous cargo ships began to grow faint in the morning's haze.

A whistle sounded high above. James glanced up and saw a man in what looked like a wooden bucket, attached to the main mast. The whistle protruded from between his lips and he held a long collapsible telescope to one eye. As James watched, the man lowered the telescope and spat out the whistle, which dangled around his neck on a length of string.

"Now exiting the Muggle mainland," he bellowed. "Entering international magical waters."

A deckhand, whistling cheerfully, passed close behind the five travelers where they gathered near the railing. James turned to watch as the man bent, grabbed the handle of a large deck hatch, and heaved it open.

"All right, Dodongo, you heard the man," the deckhand called down into the darkness below-decks. "Put it out then. Don't make me come down there."

James and the rest drifted toward the deckhand and peered down into the shadows. The interior of the hold was huge, taking up most of the ship's bow. Portholes illuminated an enormous, hairy shape where it lounged in the hold, taking up most of the space. James blinked in shock. The creature was like a gorilla, but grown to monumental, titanic proportions. Its great leathery face peered up at the open hatch, sucking its lips thoughtfully. Its feet clutched the pedals of a complicated, brass mechanism, turning it easily. The mechanism, in turn, operated a driveshaft that extended through the rear of the hold, apparently driving the ship's propeller. To James increasing surprise, the gigantic ape seemed to be smoking an equally gigantic cigar, puffing black smoke up into a funnel-shaped tube.

"Picked him up years ago," the deckhand explained, planting his hands on his hips and shaking his head. "Found him wandering some lost island in the South Pacific. Someone had the

crazy idea that he'd make a great attraction on the mainland, make us all millionaires. Problem was, once we got him on board, he never wanted to leave. You know the old joke about where a thirty thousand-pound gorilla sits, right? Wherever he bloody well pleases."

James, Ralph, Izzy, Albus, and Lucy looked from the deckhand to the enormous gorilla again. Dodongo pedaled happily, making gentle *ook* noises to himself and puffing his monstrous cigar.

"Hi!" the deckhand called again, cupping his hands to his mouth. "I told you to put that thing out, didn't I? It's the last one we've got on board until Bordeaux. What else you going to use to fake smokestack smoke, eh? Banana peels?"

"I guess," Lucy said in a small voice, "there *is* a bit of a difference between a Muggle ship and a magical ship."



The first leg of the ocean journey progressed swiftly. James explored the ship with his fellow travelers, finding the galley kitchens, the aft storage hold, a dozen small but meticulously dapper staterooms, and even the captain's quarters, which the crew of teenaged witches and wizards (and Izzy) barged into quite by accident while chasing each other through the narrow corridors. The captain's rooms were in the rear of the ship, above the hold, with a curving bank of windows that overlooked the ship's boiling wake. It would have been a very interesting place to explore, what with its framed maps, brass lanterns, and bookshelves cluttered with curious nautical tools and artifacts, except for the fact that the captain himself was there, looking up from his desk with a mixture of annoyance and weary patience. James had apologized as quickly and formally as he knew how, backing out of the room and herding the others behind him.

Most of the day, however, was spent up on the decks, lounging in the hazy sunlight and watching the crewmen manage the ship's complicated rigging. James was only slightly surprised to learn that the deckhands sang songs while they worked, raising their voices in unison so that the sound carried over all the decks, clear and cheerful in the gusting winds.

"So," Albus said, leaning against the high stern railing, "I wonder if this is the poop deck?"

Izzy tittered, but Petra rolled her eyes. "That joke wasn't funny the first time, Albus. It doesn't get any better with age."

"I'm *not* joking," Albus said, raising his eyebrows with guileless innocence. "I'm just asking a question. Every ship has a poop deck. It's a known fact. I'm just trying to make this an educational experience."

"Yes," Lucy nodded. "Because that's so very like you."

"I like the songs," Ralph said, looking up at the masts as a pair of crewmen climbed and capered, singing in harmony. James couldn't help noticing that the sails were still furled, lashed neatly to the strange, articulated masts.

Albus smirked. "Mum says the songs are nice, so long as you don't listen to the actual words."

"Which only makes you pay even closer attention," James agreed. "I especially like the one about the old dead pirates fighting over a doubloon, chopping off bits of each other until there's nothing left but a bunch of skeletal hands hopping around, gripping cutlasses."

"A lot of them do seem to have a similar theme," Petra agreed. "A lot of dead pirates, barrels of rum, cursed lost treasures, that sort of thing."

"I heard Merlin and Dad talking about it at lunch," Albus said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Merlin says ever since the International Magical Police have cracked down on wizard piracy, a lot of the pirates have had to turn to more honest work. Most of them take jobs on ships like this. I bet these blokes are all former privateers themselves! You think?"

Ralph squinted up at the men in the masts. "I'd have expected more peglegs and parrots," he shrugged.

Albus rolled his eyes.

As the afternoon wore on, Petra and Izzy went below-decks to have tea and unpack. Albus wandered off in search of deckhands to grill about their nefarious former lives, and James, Ralph, and Lucy meandered their way to the bow, where they found James' dad, Professor Longbottom, and Merlinus Ambrosius watching the seas and talking.

"Did you see the big gorilla?" James asked as the adults greeted them.

Harry nodded. "The captain took us down to meet him. He's very intelligent. Likes popcorn. Apparently he's the primary mode of propulsion on the landward ends of the journey."

"The captain says it keeps him from getting fat and lazy," Neville added, smiling.

"You met the captain too?" Lucy asked, peering up at the men.

"He's an old wizard's navy man," Neville answered. "And a distant relative of mine. Knew my parents, way back when I was a baby. I haven't seen him in decades, but still, it's nice to connect with the old family network."

Ralph glanced from Merlin to Harry Potter, and then asked, "What are you all looking for?"

"I smell land," Merlin replied mildly. "I think we have nearly reached today's destination."

James blinked. "Already? We're there?"

"Boy," Ralph commented, peering out over the waves, "magic sure makes the world an itty bitty place."

"He doesn't mean we've already made it to America, silly," Lucy said, laughing. "We're stopping at a port along the way."

"What for?" James asked.

"To pick up more travelers," Harry replied, taking off his glasses and wiping sea mist from them with his shirt tail. "And drop off cargo, get supplies, and get rigged for the transatlantic leg of the journey."

"You mean," Ralph said, clarifying, "we've sailed all day, and we haven't yet gotten to the transatlantic part?"

"The ocean is a monstrously large place," Merlin said, smiling, his beard streaming in the wind. "It provides us an excuse not to do anything for a day or two. Enjoy it, Mr. Deedle. Soon enough, the pace of life will catch us all up again."

James looked at Ralph expectantly. "Did you hear the Headmaster?" he prodded gently.

Ralph glanced at him and then rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes. '*Monstrously*' large. Look, I'm not a big baby. You can stop trying to give me nightmares."

"I would have said the ocean was 'beastly huge,'" Lucy said, "but 'monstrously' is even better. Reminds me of those old woodcut maps covered in sea serpents and krakens and the like."

"Is that land over there?" Neville asked suddenly, leaning on the railing and squinting.

Merlin nodded. "It may well be. You can smell it, can't you? The trees, the sand..."

"Not all of us are quite as sensitive to such things as you are, Headmaster," Harry replied, shaking his head.

James leaned against the railing and peered into the distance. The sky had grown clear and cloudless as the day progressed. Now, as the sun lowered, the clarity of the air made the horizon seem like something he could very nearly reach out and touch. The ship's prow bounced rhythmically on the waves, sending up bursts of fine spray. Beyond it, sitting on the watery rim of the world like a bug on a windowsill, was a tiny black shape.

"What is it?" Lucy asked, shading her eyes. "Is it another boat?"

No one answered. Gradually, the shape grew as the *Gwyndemere* approached it, slowing almost imperceptibly. To James, it began to look like the top of a giant's head, fringed with wild hair, peeking over the horizon. He watched, transfixed, as the shape finally resolved into the unmistakable outline of a tiny island, hardly bigger than the back garden of the Potter family home in Marble Arch. A narrow white beach ringed the island, embracing a growth of brush and wild grasses. In the center, half a dozen scrubby trees swayed ponderously. As the *Gwyndemere* slowed, coming within shouting distance of the tiny island, James was shocked to hear a voice cry out from the shadow of the trees.

"A ship!" the voice shouted. "Oh, thank heavens, a ship! At long last!"

A man stumbled out onto the beach and jumped up and down, waving a length of driftwood in his hand. The man was very thin and wildly bedraggled, his hair and beard grown to nearly comical proportions and his clothing bleached white.

"Hooray!" he shouted. "My messages in all those old bottles were not in vain! The seagulls laughed at me, they did! Told me it was foolish to hope, but I kept the faith! I knew someday my long, long sojourn would come to an—oh, it's you," he said, his voice dropping on the last three words.

"Ahoy, Roberts!" a sailor in the *Gwyndemere*'s crow's nest called. "All's clear along the span o' the compass. Captain Ash Farragut requests landing."

"Permission granted," the erstwhile castaway called back grumpily, turning and walking back toward the trees. His voice carried easily over the lapping waves as he muttered, "Tells me all's clear along the span o' the compass. Like I ain't been sittin' here all day, keepin' a lookout. S'my job, after all, isn't it?" James watched with fascination as the bedraggled man stopped beneath one of the trees and tapped it with his driftwood walking stick. "Portmaster Roberts reporting the arrival of the *Gwyndemere*, Captain Farragut in command, with partial complement of travelers, goods, and cargo. Forty minutes late too, unless the sun's a liar."

"Ah, we've reached port," a voice behind James said cheerfully. He glanced back to see his Uncle Percy dressed in a fancy traveling cloak and matching derby. "Aquapolis for the night, ladies and gentlemen. Last landfall 'til journey's end. I'll go tell the others."

James glanced from his uncle to Ralph and Lucy. "Some 'port' this is. I'm not even sure we'll all fit down there."

"Yeah," Ralph agreed. "If it's all the same to everyone else, I think I'll just stay here on the ship for the night."

"Quite clever of the portmaster to play the part of a shipwreck survivor, though," Lucy commented appreciatively. "Just in case any Muggle ships come in sight of the place."

James looked back at the man on the shore, his brow furrowed. "How sure are you that he's just playing the part?"

"Whoa," Ralph said suddenly, grabbing onto the railing with one hand. "What's that?"

"What's what?" James asked, and then gasped as he felt it too. The ship was shuddering very faintly, as if a thousand fists were pounding on the hull. A sound accompanied the sensation, a sort of low rumble, deep and huge.

"It's all right," Neville said, albeit rather nervously. "Somehow, I think this is supposed to happen."

"It's not just happening on the ship," Lucy cried, pointing. "Look at the island!"

James looked. The leaves of the trees were shaking faintly. A large yellowish fruit fell from one of the trees and rolled to a stop on the white sand. Strangely, there seemed to be far more of the

sand than there should have been. It was as if the beach was expanding around the island, growing, pushing back the waves. The man on the shore seemed to be completely unperturbed by the phenomenon. He ambled over to a large dark boulder, reached behind it and retrieved a clipboard, which he consulted critically.

“Behold,” Merlin proclaimed, raising his chin against the increasing wind. “The wonders of the lost city. Behold Aquapolis, grandest of the seven cities of the continent of Atlantis.”

Slowly, the island rose, pushed upwards by a great, dark shelf of stone. The foundation widened as it elevated, as if the island were merely the topmost peak of a huge undersea mountain. Water thundered down the faces of broad cliffs, coursing out of dozens of deep crags and caverns. James watched, dumbstruck, as the landmass grew, extending great rocky arms out to embrace the *Gwyndemere*, creating a bay around it. Regular shapes became visible as they pushed upwards through the waves: peaked roofs, domes, and spires first, and then monumental stone columns, arches, and colonnades. Soaring bridges and stairways crisscrossed the mountain, connecting the structures and enclosing walled courtyards, ancient statuary, and bright, colourful gardens of coral. Sunlight shimmered over the city as it revealed itself, reflecting as if from innumerable, enormous jewels. With a thrill of wonder, James realized that the shining shapes were not jewels, in fact, but glass windows and doors, fitted into exquisitely crafted coppery frameworks. The windows glittered like rainbows as the seawater coursed down them, glinting from every opening and doorway, from between every pillar and column, completely enclosing the city in rippling, briny brilliance.

“I’ve heard of this place,” Harry Potter said, placing a hand on his son’s shoulder, “but I never imagined it would be like this.”

“Are the other six cities of Atlantis like this too?” Ralph asked in an awed voice.

Merlin sighed somberly. “Alas, the Aquapolis is the lone survivor of the great Republic. The others have long since settled to their watery graves, having exhausted their magic as their populations dwindled, drawn to the fixed lands. Such is the course of history. All great things, even the most wondrous, must meet their ends.”

“Did you see it?” Albus cried suddenly, grabbing James’ shoulder and shaking him enthusiastically. “Did you see it come up out of the water?”

“It was pretty hard to miss, Al,” James laughed, turning. “Where were you?”

“The first mate took me up to the pilothouse to watch!” Albus exclaimed, beside himself with excitement. “Me and Petra and Izzy. Mum and Lil too! It was bloody awesome!”

“Don’t say that word,” Ginny said mildly, following Albus across the deck with the others at her side. “But it was, really. I had no idea.”

“Well,” Harry announced grandly, turning to face the travelers, “all ashore who’s going ashore!”

James grinned and turned to look back at the great island again. Its countless windows sparkled gently as the sun lowered, painting the city bronze and gold. A crew of men in neat red

tunics was piloting a ferry toward the *Gwyndemere*, apparently prepared to transport everyone aboard to their home for the night.

"It's gorgeous, isn't it?" Ginny said, sighing. "Almost makes the whole trip worthwhile."

James smiled up at his mother. For the moment, not knowing yet what was still to come, he agreed with her completely.



James lay in his bed and stared up at the low ceiling, unable to sleep. The Aquapolis' lodgings were clean, ornate, and well-maintained, but very, very old. The entire city, spectacular as it was, smelled vaguely damp, which was, of course, perfectly understandable. Uncle Percy, who apparently suffered from mold allergies, had had a rather difficult time of it, especially as evening had set and the city had once again sank into its watery habitat. Eventually, Aunt Audrey had asked one of their Atlantean hosts, a pretty, plump young woman with thick black hair and olive skin, if Percy might be offered a particular brand of medicinal tea. The woman, whose name was Mila, had taken one look at Percy's red nose and eyes, and returned minutes later with an empty cup and a small steaming pot. Upon drinking the pot's contents, Percy no longer sneezed or sniffled, but had nevertheless remained in a rather irritable mood throughout the evening.

Merlin, as was usually the case, was treated with great fanfare upon his arrival in the city, even as he disembarked from the ferry with James and Ralph at his side. Men in long white robes and curiously carved staffs met them on the steps of the city's reception hall, which was hewn directly out of the stone of the mountain. While the city's leaders and Merlin exchanged formal greetings, Lucy and Albus had caught up to James and Ralph, and all four of them had stood looking about with undisguised wonder. Water still ran over the intricately patterned marble floor and dripped from the high vaulted ceilings, and James understood that the reception hall, grand as it was, was filled with seawater most of the time. A great stone column dominated the entryway to the space, topped with a monumental statue of a bearded wizard in flowing toga-like robes, a staff in his left hand and his right hand raised, pressed to the base of one of the ceiling's vaulted supports, as if he was holding it up.

"Soterios," Lucy had said, reading the inscription that wrapped around the base of the statue's column. "The Hero of Atlantis. He was the one that unified the wizarding populous of Atlantis and created the network of magic that kept the cities intact, even as their foundations eroded

away. I read about him in the wizard library at home. ‘Poios Idryma sozo para magica dia magikos’.”

“What’s it mean?” Albus had asked, walking around the column to read the inscription.

Izzy, Lily, and Petra had gotten off the ferry by then and joined the others near the base of the statue. Petra had peered at the ancient carved words. “It means, ‘who saved the foundations of magic, by magic’.”

“So,” Ralph had said slowly, “this whole place is held together by, what...?”

Petra had shrugged. “The collective magical will of the witches and wizards who live here.”

“Makes sense, really,” Lucy had commented. “After all, the Greeks did invent the concept of democracy, which is really just the idea of the city being supported by the people who live in it. Granted, this takes it to a rather new level.”

Ralph had shaken his head and looked around at the massive, dark ceilings. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m a little iffy about the idea of willpower as structural bedrock.”

“That’s because you’re thinking of *your* willpower,” Lucy had sniffed.

“It’s held up for centuries, Ralph,” Albus had said, shrugging. “What could happen?”

Ralph had glanced back at Albus, then at Merlin, who was still chatting with the Aquapolis elders some distance away. “I don’t know,” he’d replied. “Why don’t you ask the *other* six cities of Atlantis?”

Later, as the sun had set on the horizon amidst a flaming cauldron of colourful clouds, an Atlantean elder named Atropos had taken the travelers on a tour of the city, leading them along broad, sweeping staircases and bridges, through enormous colonnades, past ornate oceanic gardens, statues and arches. Many of the city’s myriad, enormous windows had been cranked open, letting in the cool, ocean breeze.

“The city has remained virtually unchanged since its descent into the depths,” Atropos had explained. “When the waters began to rise, our ancestors had enough forewarning to design and construct a system of watertight crystal valves, which you see all around us. They are virtually unbreakable, and are reinforced by a unique alchemy that makes them less brittle.” To illustrate, Atropos had approached one of the tall copper-framed windows that fitted between a set of herculean columns. He leaned on the crystal with one hand, and then gently applied his weight. Instead of breaking, the crystal bent slowly around his hand, almost like a very large, very thick soap bubble. Finally, Atropos’ hand had pushed entirely through. He’d wiggled his fingers in the dying sunlight on the other side of the crystal, smiling thinly back at his attendees. Merlin had nodded slowly, impressed.

“Remarkable,” Denniston Dolohov had enthused. “Tell me, is this proprietary magic? Or would the Atlanteans be willing to share it? I can think of dozens of security applications for such a thing.”

“Doesn’t he ever go off duty?” Aunt Audrey had muttered to her husband, who shushed her.

"That's why he's here, dearest," he'd replied quietly. "His new post at the Ministry places him in charge of a whole new department of anti-Muggle defensive magic and technomancy. These are uncertain times, as you well know. And growing more uncertain every day."

At that point, Percy had shared a meaningful glance with Neville Longbottom and James' dad. Harry had shrugged slightly, raising his eyebrows and nodding toward Atropos, as if to say *not now*.

After a lavish dinner of strange, deep-sea fish and crustaceans, some of which were as large as hippogriffs and more bizarre than James was prepared to taste, the Aquapolis had sunk again. James, Ralph, and Lucy had watched from the broad crystal portals of a Parthenon-like structure built atop one of the island's curving peninsulas. The sun had finally dipped beneath the rim of the horizon, leaving only a faint pinkish glow at the edge of the star-strewn sky. For a while, the *Gwyndemere* had been visible in the bay far below, rocking gently on its own reflection. Presently, the marble floor had begun to rumble beneath the observers' feet and the bay had begun to rise, pushing up and out, slowly overtaking the Aquapolis' lower reaches. Silently, water had poured into the reception hall, far below and halfway around the bowl of the great city. James had glimpsed the statue of Soterios, tiny with distance, as the ocean rushed around it, swallowing it up. As the island sank away, the *Gwyndemere* had risen higher and higher, until it was nearly eye-level with James, Ralph, and Lucy where they watched, breathlessly. The pink light of the dying sun had painted the ship on one side while the faint blue glow of the new moon lit the other. And then, so suddenly that it had made all three students jump back in alarm, water had rushed up over the crystal window before them, swallowing it with a dull, thunderous roar. After that, there was only the dim, featureless blue of the depths, punctuated, faintly, by pinpricks of light that glowed from the submerged city.

It had been wondrous, in a grave, solemn sort of way.

Now, as night enveloped the city and everyone, including James' parents and sister in the next room, had gone to bed, James lay awake, alert and restless. Lantern light seeped beneath the door from the corridor beyond. James' eyes had grown used to it so that he could easily see the ancient, cracked fresco painted onto the ceiling. In it, a man in a short tunic and a sort of leafy crown was wrestling a giant octopus, clutching four of its tentacles beneath his muscled arm and stunning it with the staff in his other hand. To James, it didn't look like a fair fight. He found himself rooting for the octopus.

It had been a very strange summer. The surprise arrival of Petra and Izzy had, of course, caused quite a stir. It had happened mere weeks after the last day of school, and James had only just begun to get comfortable with the fact that Petra had graduated and would not be showing up in the Gryffindor common room next term. It was a shame, he told himself, because he had finally admitted to himself that he did, in fact, feel something stronger for Petra than mere friendship. Apparently, everyone else had seen it before he had, including his own mum, who had made some fairly embarrassing comments about it in the wake of the school play. Despite the fact that the event had ended in a disastrous uproar, James had spent more than a few wistful moments remembering the fact that the play, *The Triumvirate*, had required he and Petra to play the parts of doomed lovers. He was still young enough to think that that pairing had been ripe with cosmic significance, and had

secretly (so secretly that he himself had barely even known it) hoped that Petra would recognize it as well.

She had not, of course.

At first, James had believed that this was because Petra was still in love with her former beau, Ted Lupin. Later, however, he'd realized that Petra had been under the influence of a secret, awful curse. Due to a series of very wicked schemes, set in motion by none other than the long dead Dark Lord himself, Petra Morganstern was the living carrier of that villain's last, ghostly shred of soul. It had been imparted to her while she was still in her mother's womb, transmitted via a special, nearly unheard-of bit of cruel, dark magic: a special kind of Horcrux, in the shape of an ugly silver dagger.

James' dad had done some research on it, with the help of Aunt Hermione, and had discovered that such a thing was called a 'transcendent Horcrux'. They'd only found one reference to it, in a book so dark and treacherous that James' dad and Uncle Ron had had to bolt it to the table with silver stakes to keep it from snapping their hands off. According to their awed, whispered conversations (which James and Albus had surreptitiously listened in on), a transcendent Horcrux was purely theoretical; no one, at the time of the book's writing, had ever succeeded in actually creating one. Unlike other Horcruxes, a transcendent Horcrux could never be used to restore the bit of soul it contained to its original host. If such a thing were attempted, it would act as a kind of poison, killing every other bit of the soul it had been sheared from, regardless of how many normal Horcruxes were in use. The shred of preserved soul in a transcendent Horcrux had to be passed on to *another* host, accepted willingly, there to spread its influence and live on, leech-like.

Petra's mother had been tricked into transmuting the curse of Voldemort's soul into her unborn baby, but that didn't make James hate her any less. As far as he was concerned, the woman had to have been either stupid, gullible, or blind. Miraculously, however, Petra herself loved her long dead mother, loved her and missed her enough to have nearly doomed all of mankind in the hopes of somehow bringing her back to life. In the end, fortunately, Petra herself had been stronger and smarter than her mother had been, and she had made the right choice—the hard choice. She had rejected the deal offered to her by the otherworldly beast called the Gatekeeper, even though it had meant the loss of the one thing she'd most wanted in all the world: the return of her dead parents.

Not very surprisingly, the realization of all of these things had not in the least diminished James' fascination with the young witch. If anything, it had increased it. James himself had confronted the Gatekeeper, and knew the awful stresses Petra had to have endured in rejecting its tantalizing offer. Furthermore, there was just something about Petra, something about the reality of her internal struggles and her painful, personal losses, that made James want to be brave for her.

In his most secret heart, she awoke a deep, pervasive sense of manly nobility. He wanted to defend her, to slay her dragons, to be her knightly savior. Of course, he told no one about these feelings. He was sheepish about admitting them even to himself. In the light of day, his infatuation with her seemed silly, childish, quaintly preposterous. She was of age, for one thing, graduated and free, a young woman moving out into a grownup's world, while he was still a month shy of fourteen. Still, the feelings clung to him, as did his affection for her. Without even trying, she had smitten him. Fortunately, as the summer had progressed, absence and distance had helped James begin to

forget the girl who had occupied so much of his attention during the previous school year. Such, he thought (rather wisely for his age), was the nature of young love.

And then, to his mingled dismay and delight, Petra and Izzy had arrived at the Potter family home, escorted by Ted Lupin, Damien Damascus, and Sabrina Hildegard. There had been much curiosity about what had brought them there, but very few questions, at least at first. It was apparent that something awful had happened, something that had resulted in the deaths of both Petra's grandfather and his horrible wife, Phyllis, Izzy's mother. Ted, Damien, and Sabrina had kept quiet about whatever they had seen at Morganstern Farm, apparently believing it was Petra's tale to tell (and later because Merlin had apparently sworn them to secrecy). Ted had, however, taken James' dad and mum aside and asked if it would be all right if Petra and Izzy stayed at the Potter home until things settled down. This had been agreed to quickly and with very little fuss, so that by that very evening, James had found himself going to bed only one wall removed from the girl who, completely and inexplicably, commanded his every affection.

He'd lain awake that night and listened to the soft footsteps and murmured voices in the next room, wondering what it all meant, if anything; wondering if there was something he could do, some way to salvage the bravery he'd felt only days before, when he'd told himself that if Petra *had* been coming back to Hogwarts the next term, he would have told her exactly how he felt about her, and done whatever was necessary to inspire the same in her.

He lay awake now as he had then, staring up at the fresco of the Atlantean warrior wrestling the unfortunate octopus, and wondered much the same things. Petra had accompanied the Potters on their trip across the ocean, apparently intending to seek employment at the school James would be attending during their stay. Considering her intellect and her uncanny magical skills, James thought it very likely that she would get any job she applied for. In short, Petra's life seemed, even now, to be mysteriously intertwined with his own. It was like the play, *The Triumvirate*, all over again, like their fleeting, staged kiss at the end, the one that should have ended so wonderfully, and had instead ended with chaos and near tragedy. The mingled hope and fear filled James with a queer, intense range of emotions.

And on the heels of that, James was reminded of the odd, creepy words that Professor Trelawney had uttered to him early that very morning. The professor was, of course, a few octocards shy of a full deck. Hardly anyone believed her proclamations and visions. And yet, what James had heard and witnessed in the corridor with her that morning had been dramatically different than anything he'd ever seen in her class. It had seemed all too real, all too certain. But what had any of it meant? James didn't know, but maybe Lucy would. She was smart about such things, remarkably pragmatic and clearheaded. He made a mental note to ask her about it during their voyage.

As James stared up at the fresco over his head, a soft noise caught his attention, coming from the corridor outside his room. A shadow obscured the ceiling fresco for a moment and James glanced down toward the bar of light beneath the heavy door of his room. The unmistakable silhouette of a pair of walking feet passed by. James frowned curiously.

"Hey Al," he whispered. "You awake?"

"Mrmnm," Albus declared from the other side of the narrow room, rolling over.

James considered waking his brother, even got out of his own bed and reached to shake him, but then he thought better of it. Holding his breath, he approached the door, thumbed the latch, and pulled it open as quietly as he could.

There didn't seem to be anyone in the corridor. Lantern light flickered silently, reflecting on the tiled marble floors and white walls. Leaving the door slightly open, James padded along the corridor in the direction that the shadowy figure seemed to have gone. He reached the end of the corridor and entered a larger hallway lined with statuary and doorways on one side and tall crystal windows, interspersed with pillars, on the other.

Beyond the windows, the city seemed very dark in its watery bed. Only a few lights could be seen glimmering in the blue distance. Under a glass-enclosed bridge, a whale maneuvered deftly, its bulk black in the dimness, its tail waving ponderously. James saw his own reflection in the crystal; saw his tee shirt, pyjama bottoms, and bare feet. His hair, as usual, was stuck up in a wild strew. He frowned at himself, even though he liked what he saw. He was getting taller, was, in fact, nearly as tall as his mum now. "You could pass for a seventh-year," she had told him recently, before they'd known they would be spending the year away from Hogwarts, in an entirely different country. "You've gone and turned into a man," she'd said, smiling indulgently and a little mistily, "and I barely noticed it happening. Albus and Lily too, but especially you. You're growing up. You're becoming your own man."

James sighed, wishing his mother had been right. He didn't feel like his own man, at least not yet. But he was getting there. The past two years had made their mark, as had his recent ordeal with the Gatekeeper, which had, very fortunately, ended with its eternal banishment. James didn't yet feel like a man, but he could sense the essential framework of his manhood taking shape inside him, defining who he was going to be, giving him hope and a fleeting, giddy strength. Maybe Scorpius had been right. Maybe there would be another adventure in the offing this year. If there was, and if James was going to be a part of it, he thought that he might just be ready for it. This time, he wouldn't stumble into it filled with uncertainty and self-doubt. This time, he thought, grinning to himself, he'd face it head on.

"So very like your grandfather," a voice said quietly, smiling. James startled and whipped around, looking for the source of the voice. A tall figure stood next to him, staring out the crystalline window, its robes so seamlessly black that they cast no reflection on the mirror-like surface.

"Sorry," James said quickly, his eyes wide. "I didn't hear you, er... how long have you been there?"

"You are growing bold," the figure said, and James realized it was a woman. Her voice was pleasant, friendly. "Bold and confident, James Sirius Potter, nor does this come as a surprise to anyone who might be paying the slightest bit of attention. It is, in fact, exactly as it should be."

James peered at the woman, trying to see her face under the thick hood that covered her head. "Thanks, I guess. How do you know me?" he asked.

She noticed his look and laughed lightly. “I am a fellow traveler, James. Didn’t you see me aboard the *Guyn demere*?”

James thought for a moment. “No, actually. Sorry. And I expect I’d have remembered you, to be honest. Were you wearing... er... that?”

“People tend not to notice me, believe it or not,” the woman sighed. “Unless they want to, or unless I make them. But I apologize. We were talking about you, weren’t we?”

“I guess so,” James replied, taking a step back. He felt a little strange standing in the empty corridor with the woman, especially since she seemed to be fully dressed and he was in his bedclothes, his hair teased into corkscrews. He reached up and matted it down as unobtrusively as he could. “But like I said, how do you know about me? Who are you?”

“Oh, everyone knows you,” the woman said, her voice smiling. “Everyone in the wizarding world, at least. Son of the great Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, et cetera, et cetera. Why, you’ve spent so very much time wondering how you should and shouldn’t be like your father that you’ve completely failed to see all the ways—the far more *important* ways—that you are like your namesake, your grandfather, James Potter the First.”

James glanced from the darkly clothed woman next to him to his own reflection in the crystal glass. Strange as it seemed, the woman was right. It had never occurred to him to wonder about his grandfather on his dad’s side, to wonder if he himself bore any of that man’s personality traits or physical attributes. Everyone said that Albus was the one who most looked like the young Harry Potter. Maybe James had, therefore, inherited the looks and personality of his long lost grandfather. It wouldn’t be all that surprising, really. Truthfully, it was quite a nice thought. He shrugged at his reflected self, musing.

“Did you know my grandfather?” he asked the robed woman. “James the First?” As soon as he’d asked it, he felt foolish for doing so. The woman couldn’t possibly be that old.

“Not as such,” the woman answered, a laugh in her voice. “I am rather a student of history, that’s all. You Potters are quite famous, as I have already mentioned, and your family name has a long and rich ancestry, dating back more than a thousand years. You may be interested to know that your experience with Merlinus Ambrosius is not the first time the Potter name has been historically linked to the great sorcerer. He saved the life of a distant relative of yours, in fact, albeit indirectly.”

“Really?” James asked, glancing back at the woman again. Her face was still hidden, lost in shadow. “When? How?”

“A story for another time, I think,” the woman demurred. “For now, I think I will be on my way. I was simply entranced by the view here. A city buried underwater is truly a spectacular sight. You might say that it appeals to me, in a rather deep, elemental way.”

“Yeah,” James said, sighing. “Me too, I suppose. But I should probably get back to my own room. I couldn’t sleep. I was just too excited.”

"Indeed," the woman nodded, her voice teasing. "That sort of thing seems to be rather common this night. Your friend is also up and wandering. But of course, you must already know that. You are probably planning to meet her." She exhaled slowly, wistfully. "Ah, young love..."

"Who?" James asked, frowning, but of course he knew the answer already. "Petra?"

"I'm sure I don't know her name," the woman answered tactfully, but her hooded head turned, gesturing toward the deserted hall behind James. She nodded, as if prodding him in the right direction. James finally had a glimpse of the woman's face. She was pretty, and younger than he had expected. A curl of reddish hair lay on her forehead like a comma.

"Sure," James nodded. "I should probably go and... er... check on her. If she's part of my group, like you said."

The woman nodded again, her red lips smiling knowingly. James' face flushed, partly because what she was implying—that he was sneaking off to meet a girlfriend for some unchaperoned snogging—was so untrue, and partly because he so terribly wished it was.

"Good night, James," the woman said, turning away. "Sleep well."

"Good night, er," he replied, but he didn't know the woman's name. She swept on, leaving a deep shadow behind her and no reflection on the crystal windows. James frowned at her as she departed. Then, remembering what she had said, he turned and ran along the hall in the other direction.

Closed doors and crystal panels lined the hall for some distance, and then the hall widened, enclosing a large space with a dizzyingly high, dark ceiling. An ornate brass framework of crystal windows embraced one side of the space, forming shining buttresses and terraces, filled with ferns. The floor was checkered marble, each square as large as James' parents' bed. The space appeared to be a sort of common room, full of chairs, sofas, tables, and desks. A massive silver chandelier hung over the room, dominating it, but its hundreds of candles were dark. The only light in the room came from a long low fireplace and a cluster of candles that stood near it on a brass brazier. James began to cross the floor slowly, threading between the low chairs and desks, instinctively feeling that he should be very quiet. Before he was halfway to the fireplace, however, he spied a figure lying serenely on a sort of half sofa. She sat up at his approach, apparently unsurprised, and James saw that it was Izzy.

"Hi James," she said quietly. "What're you up to?"

"I couldn't sleep," he replied, matching her tone of voice. "I saw someone's shadow go by and came out to see who else was up."

Izzy nodded. "It was probably me and Morgan. That's Petra, you know. I call her Morgan sometimes still because I was there when she changed her name. I changed mine too, but I couldn't make it stick. Hers fits her, though, even though she says that everybody else can still call her by her old name."

James nodded a little uncertainly. "I see... er," he said. "Anyway, why are you both up, then?"

"Just like you," Izzy replied. "We couldn't sleep either. Petra especially, I think. She has dreams. They make her feel a little crazy," she said, whispering the last part.

James sat down on the end of the chaise as Izzy curled her feet under her. He peered over toward the fireplace. "What do you mean they make her feel crazy?"

Izzy nodded her head back and forth and shrugged. "I don't understand any of it. I don't think they're regular dreams. She says she feels them even when she's awake. She says they make her forget what really happened, the last day we were back home, on Papa Warren's farm."

James wanted to ask what *had* happened that day, but thought he probably shouldn't. Instead, he asked, "Do you think she's all right?"

"No," Izzy answered, sighing and peering back over her shoulder, toward the fireplace. "But it'll be all right in the end. She says we just need to get away from everything. That's why we're going all the way across the ocean. I think she's hoping that the dreams won't be able to find her there."

James followed Izzy's gaze and finally saw Petra, seated at a low desk near the fire, her back to them. "What do you think, Izzy?" he asked, not taking his eyes from Petra's silhouette where she sat bent over the desk. "Do you think it'll work?"

Izzy shook her head, making her blonde curls swing. "No, it won't work. Don't tell Morgan—*Petra*—that I said that, though, all right? I don't think her dreams are going to go away. I think they're going to get worse. Until it's all over, at least."

"How do you know, Iz? When will it be over?"

The girl shrugged again. "Headmaster Merlin says that she has to find out where the dreams are really coming from. He told her to chase them. That's what she's doing now. She's *chasing* them. It works best right when it happens, right when they wake her up."

James studied Petra, saw that she was engaged in some intense activity, bent over the desk so severely that she appeared to be wrestling with it. "What's she doing?" he asked very quietly. "I mean, how does she chase a dream?"

"She's writing it," Izzy said simply. "Like a story. She's good at that. She used to tell me stories all the time, when it was nights out. She'd make them all up in her head, and a lot of them were better than the stories she read to me in the books. Me and Beatrice and all the rest of my dolls all listened. It was our most favorite thing."

James could see it now that Izzy had told him what Petra was doing. Her elbow moved slightly, and a quill wavered in the air over her shoulder, silhouetted in the darkness.

"Does she read the dream to you, Iz?"

"Oh no," the girl answered quickly, obviously disinterested. "I don't want to hear them. They're nasty. I don't want to ever think about any of that ever again. It scares me too much. And it makes me sad. I miss my mother, sometimes, and I cry, and Petra doesn't know what to do. I never want to hear those stories."

James looked back at Izzy, frowning thoughtfully. "Then why do you come along when she chases the dream? Are you standing guard?"

Izzy nodded. "Yes, that's what Petra says, but I think there's another reason, maybe. I think she asks me to come because she needs me here to prove that the dreams aren't true." She sighed again, in a quick, businesslike manner, and looked at James. "She needs me here to prove that I'm still alive."

James' eyes widened. *What in the world did that mean?* He opened his mouth to ask, but a shadow moved nearby. He glanced up and saw Petra approaching, shaking her right hand as if to loosen the kinks from her fingers.

"Hi James," she said, smiling tiredly. "I see you haven't given up skulking around at night, Invisibility Cloak or not."

"Yeah," James said, his face reddening. "I couldn't sleep. Are you, you know, all right and everything?"

"I'm fine," Petra lied, glancing away. James saw that she had her knapsack in her left hand, partly unzipped. A sheaf of loose parchment lay inside. "Izzy probably told you what I was doing. I just have some things to work out, that's all."

"Izzy said it's a bad dream," James said, standing. "Is that really all it is?"

Petra looked back at him. In the darkness, James couldn't read her expression. He went on quickly, "I mean, you don't have to tell me or anything. It's just, you know, I was there. I remember what happened that night in the Chamber of Secrets and everything, and I had my own run-in with the Gatekeeper. I know what you're going through, sort of. If you, I don't know, wanted to, er, talk about it. Or whatever."

Suddenly, helplessly, Petra laughed. She shook her head wonderingly and pushed her hair out of her face. "James, you are very sweet. I'm glad you're here, and not just for the reasons you said. Me and Izzy both, we owe you and your family a lot. I don't know what we'd have done without the lot of you. But you, especially. You make me feel better. Do you know that? You make me laugh. Lately, that's a very rare thing. Walk with us, won't you?"

James could feel the heat beating off his face as the blood rushed to his cheeks. He was glad it was very dark in the room. "Sure," he said, pushing himself to his full height. "I was just checking on you. Some lady in black robes told me where you'd gone. You probably saw her already."

"I didn't," Petra answered, sighing. "Did you, Iz?"

"I only saw that man sleeping by the statue near our rooms. I think he's a lantern lighter, fell straight to sleep while out doing his job. He snored really loud, and it echoed. Remember that?" She giggled.

"I remember," Petra said, smiling.

"So," James began, feeling a little bold, "how did it go?"

Petra walked slowly along the hall, watching the murky view beyond the crystal. "How did what go?"

"The, er, dream chasing. Izzy mentioned it. She said you were writing it down. Like a story."

Petra nodded. "Headmaster Merlin told me I should try it. I didn't want to, but... it helps. A little." She touched Izzy's head lightly, resting her hand on the girl's blonde hair. "It isn't a very nice story though. It's rather horrid."

"I... I could read it, if you wanted," James said, studying the floor furiously as he walked. "If you thought it might help."

Petra was silent, and James was suddenly worried that he had offended her. He glanced aside at her, but she was looking thoughtful, her eyes half-lidded. "Perhaps," she finally said, "you may be right, James. Maybe that would weaken it. Like Izzy probably told you, it's... more than just a dream. It's like a certainty. Like a memory of something that didn't really happen, or happened very differently. I can't shake it off. It haunts me."

James nodded and willed himself not to say anymore. Silently, the three walked on, finally coming to the lantern-lit corridor where James had begun. He saw the door to his room, still standing slightly open.

"We can find our way from here," Petra whispered.

"We're just around the corner and down the stairs," Izzy added, pointing. "Past the man sleeping with the lantern wand in his hand. You want to come and hear his snore? It's funny. It sounds like this," Suddenly, loudly, Izzy snorted, making a comical imitation of a snore.

"Shh! Iz!" Petra rasped, stifling a laugh and covering her sister's mouth with her hand. "People are sleeping!"

"I know!" the girl whispered, pushing Petra's hand away. "And that's what they sound like!"

Petra shook her head at James, still trying not to laugh. James grinned at her.

"Good night, James," she said quietly. "Thanks for checking on us. Thanks for walking us back. Maybe I *will* let you read the dream. If you really want to. I think you'd probably understand it better than anyone else, for all the reasons you mentioned back in the hall. If you think you are up to it, that is."

James nodded soberly. "Definitely. If you think it will help. Besides, I'm... I'm curious."

Petra studied his face for a long moment, biting the corner of her lip. Finally, she hefted her knapsack, reaching inside, and produced a thin sheaf of parchments. Wordlessly, she handed them over to him.

"It's not a nice story," she said again. "And it won't make a lot of sense. I can tell you the rest, if you want. Later. I need to tell *someone*, I think. It's just too big a secret for... well, for Izzy and me. Do you agree, Iz?"

The blonde girl screwed up her face thoughtfully. She shrugged.

"It's all right, either way," James said, taking the parchments. There were about four pages, covered with Petra's neat, small handwriting. Suddenly, he felt strange about the offer. "Are you sure? You don't have to, if you don't want to."

"I *do* want to," Petra said, sighing again. "But you can't tell anyone, all right? Not any of it. I swear, if you do..."

James shook his head vigorously. "I won't! I promise! Pinky promise, even!"

Petra blinked at him, and then laughed again. "All right, I believe you. Thanks, James. See you in the morning. We still have a long way to go, don't we?"

James nodded. "Good night, Petra. Night, Iz."

The girls turned and continued down the hall, Petra's hand on her sister's shoulder. James looked down at the small stack of parchment in his hands, barely believing what had happened. He felt both giddy and dreadfully nervous about it. He wanted to read Petra's dream story, wanted to read it that very moment, standing in the dim light of the Atlantean corridor, and yet he was strangely afraid to do so. What if it was as awful as Petra said it was? Nothing, he felt quite sure, could change the way he felt about her (whether he liked it or not) and yet...

Finally, he turned and pushed the door of his room open, letting himself into the darkness inside. He passed the shape of his sleeping brother and crept toward the table next to his bed, where his duffle bag lay, unzipped. He rooted in the bag for a moment until he found his wand. Glancing around, he laid Petra's story on the bed and pointed his wand at it.

"*Velierus*," he said, as quietly as he could. A tiny burst of blue light illuminated the bed, and the parchments folded together, doubling over repeatedly until all that remained was a thick packet, no bigger than an auger. It was totally seamless, as if it was encased in a perfect sphere of parchment. Kneeling, James hid both his wand and the secret package in the bottom of his bag. A moment later, he threw himself onto the bed and pulled the covers up to his chin.

He would read Petra's dream story soon. Until then, he relished the idea that she had chosen him, and him alone, to share it with. He had suggested it, of course, but the fact remained that she had accepted his offer. She trusted him. She was glad of his presence. And what else had she said? He made her laugh. James' cousin Lucy had said the same thing to him once, last year, after Granddad's funeral, but it seemed so much more meaningful, so much more *portentous*, when Petra said it. He sighed, remembering the sound of her voice, the pleasing music of her laughter, sad and weary as it may have been.

It doesn't mean anything, he told himself, but they were only words, and his heart didn't believe them. Secretly, his heart rejoiced. Eventually, smiling faintly, he slept.



3. EIGHTY-EIGHT KNOTS

The next morning, as James and his family and friends made their way to breakfast, they were greeted by a spectacular sight. The view beyond the submerged city's crystal enclosures was a green-gold vista, filled with shimmering beams of dawn sunlight, gently streaming rafts of bubbles, and schools of silvery fish, all of which played over and around the glittering Atlantean cityscape.

James, Albus, and Lucy gazed with rapt curiosity as several strange shapes moved slowly through the water, angling back and forth between the distant ocean surface. The shapes were rather like long mirrored bubbles, some as large as a city bus, and all rippling in the faint Atlantic currents. Far below these, along the city's sloping, rocky foothills, James spied the unique patterns of sprawling oceanic gardens. Streaming leaves of kelp and neat rows of sea cucumbers grew alongside fields of far stranger and more colourful fruits and vegetables. Giant octopuses moved slowly through the gardens, and Lucy was the first to notice that they were being ridden upon by Atlantean farmers, their chests bare and their heads encased in glittering copper and crystal helmets.

As the students watched, the octopuses used their long agile arms to harvest some of the fields, and to tend to others, weeding or pruning them. One of the octopuses suddenly spread all of its arms and then contracted them together, shooting forward like a lithe torpedo. It rose up into the city swiftly, propelled by its powerful tentacles, and Albus gasped and pointed, laughing out loud; one of the Atlantean farmers was being towed behind the octopus, tethered to it by a long length of cord and standing on a sort of rounded board, which he used like a fin to steer and bob through the currents. As the pair rose into the city, chased by their shadow, James couldn't help thinking that both the octopus and the rider seemed to be having a grand time of it. Swiftly, the octopus banked

and spun, following the contours of the streets and streaming under bridges and walkways, until it roared directly in front of the window, a long dark shape against the brilliant beams of watery sunlight. The Atlantean farmer passed by a split second later, his legs flexing as he carved the currents with his bullet-like board.

"I wonder where he's going?" Albus asked, trying to peer up past the angle of the window.

"Probably bringing us our breakfast," his mum replied, gently pushing him onward. "If we don't hurry, we won't have time to eat it. We cast off in less than an hour."

A short while later, after a light breakfast of kippers and toast, the troop made their way toward a section of the city that Merlin referred to as the Aquapolis Major Moonpool. James didn't know what to expect, but was delighted and curious to find, upon their arrival, a massive amphitheater-like room which surrounded a huge dark pool of ocean water. Busy Atlantean witches and wizards milled on the circular terraces and steep staircases that surrounded the pool, which bobbed with all manner of boats.

"Looks like King's Cross on a Monday morning," James heard Denniston Dolohov comment, laughing.

"I don't expect that's too far from the truth, either," Neville Longbottom replied.

As the travelers made their way down toward the pool, James watched Atlantean conductors directing bits of the crowd this way and that, threading them along floating gangplanks and onto the decks of long narrow boats. The boats were wooden, decorated fore and aft with large carved curlicues. Men dressed in bright red tunics and high, fin-shaped caps stood on the sterns of the boats, next to the rudder lever, reading newspapers or consulting schedules as the ornately crafted benches filled before them.

A chime rang out in the bowl of the room, overriding the babble of voices. It was followed by an echoing female voice. "All commuters destined for Conch Corners and the Octodome, your skiff is departing now. Please stand clear of the descending bubble, in three, two..."

James glanced up as a gust of air pounded through the space from above, rippling through the commuters' robes and Merlin's long beard. The round, crystal skylight in the center of the ceiling bulged downwards at the force of the gust. The window elongated, trembled, and popped free, forming a monstrous, rainbow-streaked bubble. The bubble dropped precipitously onto one of the long boats, enveloping it, and then sank away into the depths, taking the boat with it. Amazingly, none of the gathered throng seemed alarmed or even to have noticed what had happened.

"I did some reading on this last night," Lucy said faintly, looking at the domed ceiling. "In the Atlantean Library. It's sort of a wonder of the world, you know, second only to the great library at Alexandria."

"Fascinating," Albus said. "You know how interested we all are in libraries, but maybe you can get to the bit about the giant doom bubbles swallowing up ships."

"Well, I'm making some guesses here," Lucy replied, following as the troop threaded onto a narrow gangplank, "but the entire continent of Atlantis has volcanic origins. Unfortunately, the volcanoes that created the continent are what ended up destroying it, breaking it up and stripping away all of its foundations. The Atlanteans harnessed the power of the volcanoes, though, and used their vents to power their industry. I would guess that that's what's behind all of this."

"What do you mean?" Ralph asked, stepping, somewhat reluctantly, onto the deck of one of the narrow boats, which was about the size of the Knight Bus. The boat captain stood in his red tunic and funny hat, scowling at a series of copper gauges installed on a post near the rudder lever.

"I suspect that those big gusts of air are volcanic exhaust," Lucy frowned thoughtfully. "And this pool is probably part of the subterranean vent system."

"No fears, everyone," Percy said cheerfully, leading Molly and Audrey to one of the benches near the front of the boat. "But do strap in and hold tight. I've heard this can be quite a ride."

"The famed Aquapolis Transit Authority," Harry said, seating himself between Ginny and Lily. "The scheduling and dispatching model for the entire wizarding world. Percy's right. Strap in and hold onto your bags, everyone."

Albus glanced at James with an expression of mingled excitement and trepidation.

"So what's it do?" Ralph asked. "I haven't had the greatest luck with wizarding transportation systems."

"There's no way to explain it properly before we leave, Ralph," Petra answered, buckling the copper clasps of her safety belt and helping Izzy with hers. "One word of advice before we go though."

Ralph looked at her a bit helplessly. "What's that?"

"Swallow your gum."

Another chime rang through the crowded space. James looked around at the bobbing boats, the floating gangplanks, the throngs of busy Atlantean commuters on the terraces above, and grinned with nervous anticipation. Once again, the female voice rang out.

"All commuters destined for the surface and launch points beyond, your skiff is departing now. Please stand clear of the descending bubble, in three, two..."

As one, the travelers looked up. High above, the bubble ceiling bulged downwards, pushed by a blast of warm, vaguely sulfur-scented air. The bubble expanded, broke away, and dropped onto them. James couldn't help ducking and covering his head. A sudden burst of pressure popped his ears and he felt the boat drop away beneath him as the bubble distorted the surface of the water, turning it concave. And then, with a dull, gurgling roar, the bubble dropped into darkness, taking the boat, and all those aboard, down with it.

Green darkness surrounded the boat. James drew a breath to comment on it, but a sudden explosion of velocity forced the air right back out of his lungs. Inertia pushed him back into his seat like a giant, soft hand. The ship's captain clung to the rudder lever as the bubble carried the craft

forward, sucked into a tube of rough, dark rock. The noise of the journey was a dull thunder, pushing on James' ears like cotton batting. He turned to look at Albus and then Ralph, both of whom were staring with wide eyes, Albus in delight, Ralph with green-faced terror. In front of them, Petra had her arm around Izzy, who was looking around with undisguised wonder. To James' complete amazement, the rest of the travelers (his family and Merlin excluded) were completely ignoring the dark view that rushed around them. Most of the Atlanteans had their noses buried in books and small scrolls or were busily tapping notes onto tablets with glimmering, enchanted chisels. One of them, a man with a long grey beard and red leather sandals on his feet, was sprawled on a corner bench, dozing.

In the darkness far ahead of the boat, a glimmer of purple light appeared. It grew with shocking speed, and James craned in his seat to watch it flash past. The purple glow formed very angular words, which shone brightly in the darkness: '*PHEBES-DUOPHENES*'. A glowing arrow pointed downwards, toward an enormous copper-framed valve, which snapped open as the ship passed it. In the darkness behind, another bubble ship shot into the open valve, which winked shut again with a barely audible clang.

While turned around in his seat, James saw that the job of the captain was not so much to steer the ship as it was to angle it up the sides of the bubble as it shot around curves, thereby conserving the monumental centrifugal forces and keeping the passengers more or less in their seats. In the darkness it was hard to tell, but James had a sense that much of the time, the boat was sideways, or even upside-down, carried full circle around the circumference of the bubble as it rocketed through the curving vent tunnels. More copper-valved exits flashed past, listing off districts of the city.

There was one harrowing moment when another larger bubble ship appeared in the tunnel before them, moving much more slowly, and James was certain that their smaller boat was going to ram into it. The captain twitched the rudder lever deftly, however, and James felt their boat revolve swiftly up, changing their inertia just enough to push the bubble over the larger boat. For one bizarre moment, James and his companions found themselves upside-down, looking *up* on the larger boat as it passed beneath them. The captain of the larger boat tipped a quick salute to the captain in the smaller boat as it roared fleetingly overhead.

Finally, a much larger valve appeared in the dark distance, enclosing what appeared to be the end of the tunnel. The glowing purple letters over it read: '*SURFACE AND ALL POINTS NORTH*'.

"Be prepared for sudden stops," the captain bellowed in a clipped monotone. James gripped his seat and gritted his teeth.

The bubble ship shot through the valve and into blinding golden light. Instantly, the ship lost almost all of its momentum and dragged to a near halt. James felt the safety belt pinch his middle as inertia threw him forward. A second later, the force broke and he flopped backwards against the bench, his hair flying. He looked around dazedly.

Petra ran a hand through her hair and smiled down at Izzy, who clapped her hands in delight.

"That was excellent!" Albus cried.

Lucy smoothed her blouse and looked aside. "How are you doing, Ralph?"

Ralph blinked. "You know," he mused, "I think I was too startled to realize I should be sick."

James craned to look behind him again. The bubble ship was still underwater, moving up and away from the submerged city. Even now, the sprawling Aquapolis was growing faint in the shimmering distance. James understood now what the mysterious shapes were that he had seen earlier that morning, the mirrored bubbles that had moved ponderously back and forth between the city and the ocean's surface. He and his fellow travelers were inside one of them now.

"I think I could live here," he murmured, turning back around in his seat.

"Ugh, not me," his cousin Molly replied from a few benches away, seated between Aunt Audrey and Uncle Percy. "Too cold and dark."

"That's what makes it so cool," Albus argued. "It reminds me of the Slytherin dungeons under the lake."

James felt a small pang at that, remembering once again that they had all left Hogwarts behind them for the year, but he pushed the feeling away. The experience of the bubble ship was too cool to ruin with depressing thoughts about what he might be missing back home. Besides, he reminded himself, Rose, Louis, Hugo, and all the rest were probably just now settling into one of Professor Binns' long incomprehensible lectures or a dull study period in the library, under the strict supervision of Professor Knossus Shert. If they knew what James and his fellow travelers had just experienced, they would likely be sick with envy—even Scorpius, although he would probably hide it well. This made James grin.

He looked up as the bubble ship rose into daylight. The surface rippled overhead like a living mosaic, its facets casting the sunlight into wild, golden prisms. Finally, the ship heaved onto the waves, where it splashed down gently and bobbed, still glimmering in its long mysterious bubble. The *Gwyndemere* stood some distance away, rocking on the waves, sunlight sparkling from its brass fixtures.

"Hup, hup, everyone," Percy called, collecting his overnight bag and standing up. "Let us be off." With his bag dangling from his hand, he extended one arm to Molly and the other to Lucy. She sidled out of her seat and approached her father, threading her arm into the crook of his elbow.

"See you on board," she called back. A moment later, there was a loud, flat *crack* in the enclosed air of the bubble, and the three had disappeared.

Ralph looked confused. "Why couldn't we just Disapparate from the city, if that's how we're getting on board the boat?"

"Apparating through water is extremely tricky business, Mr. Deedle," Merlin answered, beckoning him over. "Especially onto a moving ship. Besides, we would have missed that wonderful tube ride, wouldn't we have?"

"Come on!" James grinned, unbuckling his safety belt and scrambling up off the bench. "Last one on the *Gwyndemere* is a hinkypunk's uncle!"

"It isn't a race," Ginny chided, standing and extending a hand to Lily.

"Speak for yourself," Harry replied, stepping forward to meet his sons. "*I'm* not going to spend this voyage as a hinkypunk's uncle."

Both Albus and James grabbed one of their dad's hands. A moment later, the bubble ship vanished around them and was replaced by the deck of the *Gwyndemere*, which glowed in the morning sunlight. Cool wind coursed over the ship, singing in James' ears, and he immediately broke away from his father, laughing and running toward the bow.

"My feet were first to touch the deck," Albus called from behind. "I jumped right before we Disapparated so I'd land here first. You lose!"

James ignored his brother as he neared the pointed prow of the ship, slowing to a stop, his eyes widening.

"Mum just got here with Lil," Albus announced, catching up. "She says we're supposed to take our bags down to the cabins and what in Merlin's magic mousehole is *that*?"

"Haven't the faintest," James replied, approaching the strange shape. "It wasn't here before, was it?"

Ralph, Izzy, and Lucy joined the boys as they moved around the object. It had apparently been installed on the deck since last night's arrival and it was, essentially, a very ornate brass chair, elevated atop a series of five wrought iron steps. The chair was fitted onto a swiveling base and had a complicated brass armature attached to its front. James studied it but couldn't begin to imagine what the armature was for.

"You're the smart one, Lucy," he said, scratching his head. "What do you think this thing is for?"

"*Rose* is the smart one," Lucy admonished, mildly annoyed. "I just read a lot."

Ralph frowned crookedly. "What's the difference, exactly?

Izzy widened her eyes solemnly. "Petra says smart is in the brain of the perceiver."

"Whatever that means," Ralph muttered.

"Yeah," Albus insisted, reaching to touch the ornately crafted stairs, "but you're good at seeing how stuff fits together, Lu. It's a knack."

"Looks to me," Lucy sighed, walking around to the front of the strange fixture, "like something is missing. See that brass flange there on the end of the pivoting arm thing? Something is meant to fit into it."

"See?" Albus crowed, running around to the front to join Lucy. "That's exactly what I'm talking about!"

James heard the low voices of adults nearby. He turned and saw Merlin, Denniston Dolohov, and the *Gwyndemere*'s captain, Ash Farragut, approaching slowly.

"We haven't any time to spare, unfortunately, captain," Merlin was saying. "I am quite happy to leave matters in the hands of your very capable crew."

Farragut nodded cynically. "All *too* capable, if you take my meaning."

"Piracy isn't what it used to be," Merlin said, smiling. "In my day, one couldn't ply the waves without expecting to be boarded by any number of competing piratical hoards. They were like swarms of bees on the high seas. Considering the preventative measures enacted by the Magical Maritime Regulatory Commission, I suspect we will manage just fine, whatever befalls us."

"Their ships have been spotted on the horizon this very morning," Farragut clarified, tilting his head in the sunlight.

"Then they will expect us to remain at port," Harry Potter nodded, approaching with a grim smile on his face. "Surprise is almost always an advantage. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Dolohov?"

"Oh, I happily submit to your expertise in such matters," Denniston replied dismissively. "But I agree that we do indeed have a schedule to keep. Let us be off."

Farragut nodded approvingly. "Then let it be so. Gentlemen." He strode away, angling toward the deckhouse.

James drifted toward Petra and Audrey, who stood near the mid-ship stairs. The pair seemed to be studying a small knot of people who had suddenly appeared on the ship. "Who are they?" James asked, nodding toward a group.

"Fellow sojourners," Audrey replied, keeping her voice even. "Americans, I should think."

James peered at the newcomers. There was a group of them moving up the stairs, pushing past the others, meandering toward the bow and chattering like a flock of birds. Most of them were dressed in black, only slightly older than James, but the central figure seemed to be a woman with jet hair, a pale, angular face, and an expression of indulgent boredom. She wore a long black dress with a tightly laced bodice, a lot of silver jewelry, and heavy purple eye make-up, so that she looked, to James, rather like she had recently escaped from her own funeral.

"Pardon yourselves, students," she sang morosely to her entourage as they streamed past James, Petra, and Audrey. "We are representing another culture. We do not wish to appear rude."

The students babbled on, not sparing the others a glance, and James had the distinct impression that the woman had spoken more for his, Petra, and Audrey's benefits than that of her own charges.

Audrey spoke up, easily raising her voice over the chattering teenagers. "I take it by your accent and words that you are from the States, Miss?" she said, smiling pleasantly. "We are on our way there ourselves for a rather lengthy stay. Don't raise our expectations overmuch, lest we be disappointed that the rest of the country is not as pleasant as you and your delightful associates."

The woman slowed and faced Audrey, her expression unchanging. "Persephone Remora," she announced languidly, stretching out a limp hand toward Audrey, who shook it perfunctorily. "And please pardon me for saying so, but I was not referring to the United States. That country is only our current residence, not our home. We can hardly be expected to represent it any more than you might be expected to represent this ship. No offense meant. The fact is: I and my friends are returning from a summer's exploration of our ancestral homeland. Perhaps you have heard of it," she paused and narrowed her eyes slightly. "It is called *Transylvania*."

"Indeed I have," Audrey smiled. "Why just this spring my husband and I had quince soup with the Archduke of Brasov and his wife. Have you met them? Lovely couple. She makes her own tzuika, which is quite good."

Remora seemed faintly disdainful. "You'll excuse me for saying so, but we don't recognize the *current* Transylvanian ruling class. Our heritage is beholden to a much older historical aristocracy. I'm sure you haven't heard of it. It's rather a... *secret* society." She sniffed and looked meaningfully out over the waves.

"Ah," Audrey answered nonchalantly. "Well, I'm sure your secrets are best left uncovered. Far be it for us to pry."

Remora continued to stare out at the waves dramatically. After a moment, she seemed to realize that the pose wasn't having the effect that she had apparently hoped for. She coughed lightly and turned back. "I'm terribly sorry," she said faintly. "The sunlight does take its toll on... such as ourselves."

"I have some Amberwycke's sunblock here in my bag," Petra replied, glancing at Audrey. "I'd be happy to share it around. It's coconut-scented."

"No," Remora oozed, her shoulders slumping slightly. "Thank you ever so much. I should catch up with my friends. If you'll excuse me." She turned, began to walk away, and then looked back over her shoulder, making her eyes twinkle meaningfully. "It's been... *deliciously* delightful to meet you," she said in a low, breathy voice.

"Likewise," Audrey said, smiling cheerfully. "We'll see you this afternoon for tea, won't we?"

"Are you sure you don't want some sunblock?" Petra said, proferring the bottle. "You're looking a little peaked around the eyes."

Remora huffed and turned away, stalking toward the small throng that milled in front of the deckhouse.

"What was that all about?" James asked, frowning after the departing woman.

Audrey sighed. "Vampires," she said lightly. "So haughty and melodramatic. Ah well, whatever makes them happy."

James blinked, looking back at the black-clothed knot of people. Remora had rejoined them, and they moved around her like a school of pale, sneering fish. James frowned. "I didn't think there were any vampires in America.'

Petra shook her head, smiling crookedly. In a low stage whisper, she answered, "There aren't."

"Let's not be too hasty," Audrey said, clucking her tongue. "The United States is, after all the great melting pot. I do suspect, however, that if there *are* vampires residing in America... they are not *them*."

A man passed by in front of them, and James glanced up. He recognized the man as the ship's first mate, a burly, cheerful bloke named Barstow. He was wearing a floppy grey hat and whistling happily to himself, heading toward the bow. Over his shoulder was slung a very long, thin pole, fitted with reinforcing brass sleeves. James narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, and then ran to follow.

"Hey Barstow," Albus called, grinning, as the man approached. "When do we shove off, eh?"

Barstow answered jovially, "Depends on how well the fish are biting this morning, don't it?"

"If you say so," Albus shrugged.

Izzy plopped onto the sunny deck and crossed her legs. "What do fish have to do with anything?"

"Oh, everything, love," Barstow said gravely, adjusting his hat. "You just watch and see. You might say they're the key to the whole affair."

"I don't like fish all that much," Ralph admitted. "I think I had enough back down in the Aquapolis. I was hoping for something a little more... terrestrial."

Barstow smiled and climbed the wrought iron stairs to the brass chair. It turned slightly as he sat down on it. "This fishy ain't for eating, my friend. You just wait and see."

Everyone watched as Barstow settled himself into the seat, resting his feet on a pair of fitted pedals and turning the chair so that it faced backwards, overlooking the rest of the ship. Apparently satisfied, he lifted the strange pole straight up into the air. It wavered high over the deck, flashing darts of sunlight from its brass fittings. Carefully, Barstow began to swing the pole in a small arc, as if he were using it to draw a circle in the briny sky. The circle widened as Barstow swung faster, creating larger and larger arcs.

"Look," Izzy cried, pointing. "It's a fishing pole! Just like Papa Warren used to use on the lake!"

James squinted in the sunlight, trying to follow the movement of the pole's tip. Sure enough, a length of magical string spooled out behind it, pulling a very large ephemeral hook. Suddenly, Barstow heaved the pole back over his shoulder, stretching back so much that the hook swooped far behind him, past the prow of the Gwyndemere and out over the waves. Finally, in one swift, smooth motion, Barstow cast the pole forward, snapping the large ghostly hook through the air. It flashed past the masts, over the deckhouse and smokestack, and out over the stern, where it finally dipped into the waves. Barstow reached forward and fitted the handle of the fishing pole into the clasp that Lucy had mentioned earlier. It locked into place, making the pole an extension of the articulated brass arm. That done, Barstow relaxed, but only a little.

"What," Ralph asked, his eyes wide, "do you catch with a hook like that?"

"There's no bait on it!" Albus suddenly said, looking accusingly up at Barstow. "How do you plan to catch anything with no bait?"

"Oh, it's baited, friends," Barstow laughed, "but not with food. The hook's made of a little magical concoction I've been working on over the last decade or so. It's not an easy thing, conjuring sea serpent pheromone, believe you me."

Ralph paled a little and peered out at the choppy waves. "Sea serpent?" he repeated carefully.

"Pheromone?" James added, standing on tiptoes to see over the stern of the boat. "What's that?"

Lucy seemed to be stifling a grin. "It's sort of like a love potion. For fish."

"For a sea serpent," Ralph clarified. "I'm just trying to be sure I heard him right. That's what he said, isn't it?"

A loud twang suddenly pierced the air. Barstow heaved backwards on the pole and its articulated arm, and James saw the magical thread trembling tautly over the boat.

"There she is!" Barstow cried happily. "Landed a big one! That's Henrietta, I'll wager! She's the best of the fleet! Hold fast, everyone!"

James, Albus, Izzy, and Lucy scrambled to the ship's railing, craning down the length of the boat for a glimpse of the mysterious Henrietta. In the brass chair, Barstow grunted and cursed to himself, wrestling with the pole, which bent precipitously. "Come on over, sweetheart," he muttered through gritted teeth. "Right this way, that's it. You know the routine..."

James finally saw the point where the magical fishing line entered the water. A shape heaved beneath, pushing the waves into a sudden, boiling hill. A line of serrated fins broke the surface and sawed through it, angling toward the *Gwyndemere*.

"That can't be good," Ralph said in a high voice.

James swallowed, but Barstow seemed grimly pleased.

"That's my great big girl," he teased. "Come to papa, then. Just a little further, that's the way..."

A monstrous, serpentine shape became visible as it shot beneath the boat, dragging the magical fishing line with it. Barstow whooped happily and swung around as the chair swiveled beneath him, pulled by the massive shape beneath the waves.

"She's through the harness," he cried, bracing himself against the chair's foot pedals. "Hang on tight, everyone!"

"I really wish people would stop saying that," Ralph moaned, gripping the railing with both hands.

As if on cue, a horrible shudder shook the boat, jerking it forward in the water. James stumbled but remained upright, clinging staunchly to one of the ship's bollards. Lucy fell backwards against him and James caught her. Her black hair streamed into his face, tickling his cheeks.

"Sorry James," she called, glancing back at him over her shoulder and grinning sheepishly. "I thought I was ready for it."

James laughed. "I don't think anybody was ready for that."

"We're off!" Albus cried, running toward the prow and peering forward. "Excellent! She's pulling us! And look how fast we're going!"

"She can maintain forty knots," Barstow called down proudly, operating the screws that locked the brass armature in place. "With bursts of ninety if required. She's the fastest of all her sisters, if you ask me."

"Is she really a sea serpent?" Izzy asked, raising her hand to her forehead and studying the waves that roared under the ship's prow. "I can't see anything but a sort of froth up there by her head. That's her head, right?"

"It's her cranial fin," Barstow nodded. "And that there's Henrietta, the great Atlantean razorback. Biggest and longest of the sea beasts. Good thing she's on our side, eh? Back in the old days, creatures like her were real ship-eaters. Now, there's only a few left in the whole world. Worth more than her own weight in Galleons, she is."

"How do you steer her?" Albus asked, glancing back at the pole. "And how's that little bit of wood hold her?"

Barstow laughed. "That's just the lead," he explained, calling over the rushing wind. "We use it like reins on a horse, turning her this way and that. The real muscle is underneath the boat. She's attached to us by an iron harness and a length of anchor chain. That's what I was teasing her through, and *that's* the only tricky part. From here on out, it's smooth sailing."

In a concerned voice, Izzy asked, "Doesn't Henrietta ever get tired?"

"She ain't like us, love," Barstow replied, squinting toward the horizon. "She could take us the whole way and back with barely a breath. But we'll stop and feed her once or twice along the way, give her the breathers she deserves. After all, she's the queen of the voyage, isn't she?" He smiled lovingly at the great beast as it carved the waves.

"What about the big gorilla?" Ralph asked. "Doesn't he get bored?"

"See for yourself!" Barstow called down, hooking a thumb over his shoulder.

James, Lucy, and Ralph turned to look back. The bow's huge cargo doors were thrown open in the sunlight. Peering up out of them, resting his chin on his crossed arms, was the great ape. His black fur rippled in the wind and he blinked slowly, apparently enjoying the sense of speed and the rushing air.

"He'll be like that the whole rest of the trip," Barstow commented without looking back. "Nothing we can do about it. The great brute's happy to let somebody else do the work from here on out. He's like a dog in a carriage window, isn't he?"



The *Gwyndemere* was only half an hour into her long journey when a whistle pierced the air high overhead. James, who was still on the prow with Ralph and Lucy, glanced up. The mate in the crow's nest had his spyglass to his eye again, extended to such an extent that it almost seemed to defy gravity. "Ship spotted at two o' the clock!" he bellowed, pointing.

"Ah, this doesn't bode well," Barstow announced.

Lucy squinted up at Barstow. To James and Ralph, she said, "I can't help but notice that he's smiling when he says that."

"It's just that weird seafaring sense of humor," Ralph replied. "Like jolly songs about all your dead mates and zombie pirates and the like. They seem to have a sort of skewed perspective on life, don't they?"

High above, his voice thin in the whipping winds, the mate in the crow's nest called again. "Ship is a triple-mast clipper, bearing the sigil of the *Three-Eyed Isis*."

Barstow whistled appreciatively between his teeth. "The *Three-Eyed Isis*. That's bad, that is. Best to get below-decks, my young friends. This could get fierce."

"What's a *Three-Eyed Isis*?" James asked, leaning on the railing and shielding his eyes from the sun. Sure enough, a dark shape bobbed on the horizon, apparently tracking the *Gwyndemere*.

"That's the ship of the pirate Hannibal Farson, Terror of the Seven Seas. Looks like we're in for a wee tussle."

"Hannibal Farson isn't the Terror of the Seven Seas," the crow's nest mate called down, still scanning the horizon with his spyglass. "You're thinking of Captain Dirk Dread. That's Farson the Fearsome, Fright of the Atlantic."

Barstow nodded. "Ah, right you are, Brinks! No argument there. Hard to keep 'em all straight, isn't it?"

"If yeh're talking real terrors," a third voice called out, carrying on the wind, "then it's Rebekah Redboots yeh're thinkin' of. As beastly as she is lovely. Just as quick to kill yeh as to look at yeh, but you'd die happy, havin' gazed upon 'er deadly beauty."

Barstow and Brinks murmured their wistful agreement.

"Is that a ship over there?" Petra asked, approaching James and peering at the horizon.

"Pirates, apparently," James nodded. "Only it sounds like it's going to be a bit of a reunion, really."

Lucy looked from the distant ship to Barstow where he sat on his high brass chair. She called up, "What are they after anyway?"

"Oh, lots of stuff, love," Barstow answered enthusiastically. "Passenger jewels and money, the captain's safe, valuable cargo that they can resell on the wizarding black market..."

"And don't forget the women," Brinks added loudly. "They'll be after the women, for sure."

"But don't you worry, my pretties," Barstow said soothingly. "They'll treat you with the greatest of respect and decorum. It's the pirate way, you know, all dashing and debonair. Oftentimes, the women caught by pirates don't even want to be rescued, when it comes right down to it. Why, I knew of whole ships full of available ladies what set sail just in the hopes of being caught up by a band of the watery rogues." He sighed deeply.

"Unless it be Rebekah Redboots," the third mate's voice speculated. "Then they'd be after the men-folk, likely."

"Aye..." Brinks and Barstow agreed soberly. After a long thoughtful moment, Barstow went on. "Most likely, though, they're after Henrietta. Like I said, she's worth her weight in Galleons. Sea serpents are terrible hard to come by anymore, and every pirate captain out there is dead jealous to get one. Makes 'em unbeatable, even by the coppers from the Magical Maritimers'."

At that moment, Albus ran up, his hair whipping wildly in the wind. "Hey everybody, Uncle Percy says we need to all get below-decks, captain's orders! There might be a 'skirmish', he says!"

"Cool," James grinned, matching his brother's obvious excitement. "Are you really going to go down and miss all the fun?"

"Normally no," Albus admitted, "but Mum knows how we are. She's asked Captain Farragut if we can watch everything from the big windows in his quarters. Best view on the whole ship, he says, *and* there'll be biscuits and tea!"

"Your mum really knows how to handle a bribe," Petra said appreciatively. "Better hurry on down. And get Izzy, if you would. She's in our cabin, drawing pictures."

James glanced at Petra, and then turned to the others. "Go on," he said. "I'll catch up in a minute."

"Mum will leather you with a hex if you stay up here," Albus said, tilting his head knowledgeably. "But feel free. More biscuits for me. Come on, Lu. Where's Ralph?"

"He headed below-decks the moment you mentioned a skirmish," Lucy answered, nodding toward the stairs. She turned back to James. "You want me to wait with you?"

"No, go ahead, Lu. I just want to watch a minute. I'll be right there."

Lucy gazed at him for a long moment, her expression unreadable. "All right. See you in the captain's quarters. You too, Petra?"

"Sure," the older girl answered. "And thanks for gathering Izzy. Tell her to bring her crayons and parchments if she wants. Once she gets drawing, it can be hard to get her to stop."

Lucy nodded and turned to follow Albus.

"She's closing in on us," Brinks called, watching the horizon with his spyglass. "Matching our speed and angling to meet us dead on."

"That I can see, mate," Barstow answered amiably, gripping the pole before him. "But she won't match us for long! Let's open things up a bit."

James felt the subtle lift of the boat beneath him as Henrietta picked up speed. Waves clapped beneath the prow and exploded into sparkling mist, which flashed past the boat with dizzying speed. The *Three-Eyed Isis* began to fall past, but only very slowly. The pirate's ship was near enough now that James could see men moving around on the decks. The image on the mainsail was visible: a fanged skull with three gaping eyes. As James watched, the eyes narrowed and the skull chomped, as if it meant to swallow the *Gwyndemere* up.

"Did you read the dream story yet?" Petra asked, not taking her eyes from the rushing pirate ship.

"No, not yet," James admitted. "I haven't had much of a chance. Tonight, I think."

She nodded slowly. "I appreciate it. Talk to me after you do. All right?"

James glanced aside at her. "Sure. Why wouldn't I?"

She shrugged. "You might not want to."

James shook his head. "I'll want to. I promise."

"She's angling for a broadside strike," Brinks called down. "She's not as fast as us, so she's aiming to cut us off before we outrun 'er."

"Hard a-port," Barstow answered, turning the directional pole aside. Henrietta responded immediately, turning to the left, pulling the *Gwyndemere* away from the advancing pirate ship.

A low whistle and a burst of black sparks exploded over the left side of the ship, making Barstow jump and turn hard right again. James wouldn't have thought black sparks were even possible until he saw them swirling over the deck and fading into the rushing wind.

"Another ship!" Brinks cried from the crow's nest. "Ten o' the clock, approaching fast! Looks like the *Scarlet Mist*!"

"The *Scarlet Mist*?" Barstow repeated incredulously. "That means the two are working together, and that can only mean one thing!"

James ran to the other side of the prow and peered into the distance, immediately spying the second ship. Its red sails and black hull roared through the water, cutting the waves like a sword. "What's it mean?" he yelled over the wind.

"It means they're engaging in the old Vice and Quarry maneuver," Barstow answered. "Very risky, that is." Raising his voice, he called up to Brinks. "Keep an eye afore us, mate! Where there's two, there's three!"

"Already a-spied it," Brinks hollered, leaning forward in the crow's nest, his spyglass clapped to his eye. "It's the *Poseidon's Peril*, I'd wager."

Barstow whistled between his teeth again and shook his head. "Not good, my friends. Not good at all. I wonder what could possibly get all three of those salty dogs to work together? Surely not a single sea serpent. They'd just kill each other fightin' over her."

Another burst of black sparks rocked the *Gwyndemere* from the left. James felt the shudder of the blast beneath his feet. He was becoming rather alarmed. Petra, on the other hand, seemed strangely calm. James crossed the deck again and stood next to her. Even now, he was pleased that, despite their age difference, he was as tall as she was. Her long hair flew in the wind. A series of orange flashes appeared along the flank of the *Three-Eyed Isis*. A split second later, the *Gwyndemere* shook under a barrage of magical blasts.

"They're trying to slow us down," Barstow cried. "Time to show them what this girl can do!"

He jerked the steering pole and hunkered in his seat. Henrietta lunged forward, and James saw the serpentine humps of her back appear in the water ahead of the ship, rising out of the waves as she plowed ahead. The ship almost seemed to be skipping over the waves now. Wind coursed over the deck, singing in the rigging and thumping against the furled bulks of the sails. James leaned into the wind and peered straight ahead. The *Poseidon's Peril* was a long low boat, sitting broadside ahead of them, forming a barricade. The *Three-Eyed Isis* and the *Scarlet Mist* were angling closer, forcing the *Gwyndemere* into an inevitable collision course.

"Why aren't we slowing?" James asked breathlessly. "We're going to ram them!" He glanced back at Petra, who seemed to be watching with mild interest. James furrowed his brow at her worriedly, but she didn't appear to notice.

"My girl still has a few surprises up her sleeve!" Barstow called out, wrestling the steering pole, driving Henrietta still faster. Raising his voice to a deep bellow, he cried, "Man the sails, mates! Be ready on my mark!"

Both James and Petra stumbled and grabbed the railing as another, larger magical blast exploded directly beneath them. A metallic twang pierced the air and the *Gwyndemere* suddenly bore down into the waves, losing momentum.

Barstow cursed colourfully and loudly, obviously alarmed. James looked up at him, wide-eyed. The steering pole jutted straight out over the bow, trembling wildly, pointing directly at

Henrietta as she plowed the waves. The magical fishline glowed and throbbed, vibrating in the air like a guitar string. A deep wooden groan emanated from the deck near the brass chair's base, and James was frightened to see that it was being slowly pried up, its huge bolts bending under some enormous pressure.

"Dodongo!" Barstow cried, struggling with the steering pole. "Use that great hairy reach of yours and grab on! Hold tight!"

Behind him, the giant ape stirred. He leaned forward in the hold, raising his head over the level of the deck, and stretched his huge right arm up out of the cargo hold's wide opening. Delicately, Dodongo gripped the rear of Barstow's chair with his huge grey fingers, holding it in place.

"What's your name, boy?" Barstow called down through gritted teeth.

"James!"

"Climb up here, James, and make it quick, if you please!"

James ran around the brass chair and scrambled up the stairs, ducking under Dodongo's huge leathery palm. Barstow moved aside, nodding for James to assume the brass seat.

"They've gone and shot out Henrietta's harness chain," he announced seriously. "Broke it clean in two! She's pulling us by the lead alone, which means we barely have any control and we're dragging low in the water. We can't escape unless I get down there and *Reparo* the harness chain straight away. I need you to take the reins and hold on as tightly as you can. It's *absolutely essential* that you not let go, no matter what, understand?"

James gulped, remembering a somewhat similar experience at the beginning of the summer. Only then, it had been Merlin and the brake lever of the Hogwarts Express. He leaned forward and gripped the trembling pole with both hands. "Got it!" he said, his heart pounding.

"That's a lad," Barstow nodded, speaking very quickly. "Just keep her aimed straight at the *Poseidon*, and don't slow down no matter what. Now pay attention: the steering pole is more than just a pole. It's a wand too. I need you to watch this gauge here. When the needle reads eighty-eight knots, I need you to snap the wand upright and call this incantation: *Pesceopteryx!* Simple as that, right? That's a lad!"

Barstow leapt down the wrought iron stairway to the deck.

"Wait!" James cried, his voice cracking. "Say it again! How'm I going to remember that?"

"I'll help you," Petra called up, cupping her hands to her mouth. "Just watch the gauge!"

James looked down at the small brass instrument, his eyes bulging. The tiny silver needle trembled between the numbers fifty and sixty.

More magical blasts peppered the ship from both directions. The pirate ships on either side were coordinating their attacks, driving the *Gwyndemere* straight toward the *Poseidon's Peril*. Black sparks swirled, darkening the air. James glanced ahead. From his position on the brass chair, he could see the blockading ship very clearly. It looked alarmingly close, growing nearer even as he

watched. Pirates lined the deck, shouting and waving wands and cutlasses. Henrietta churned the water, her serpentine humps plainly visible, her serrated back sawing the waves in half.

Barstow was leaning over the bow railing, so far and so precariously that James felt sure the man must tumble over into the ocean and be driven under the weight of the advancing ship. His voice carried on the wind as he shot *Reparo* charms into the water, aiming for Henrietta's broken harness chain.

"How fast now?" Petra called up to James.

"Sixty-five!" he answered. "No faster! The lead is just pulling the bow too far down into the water, dragging us! We're never going to make it!"

"*Reparo!*" Barstow hollered, kicking his heels in the air as he leaned over the railing. "*Reparo*, you great useless hunk of rusty iron! Damn and drat!"

James gripped the pole so hard that his knuckles were white in the sunlight. He craned backwards and saw crewmen clinging from odd angles on the masts, watching breathlessly, their eyes wide and waiting. The *Scarlet Mist* and the *Three-Eyed Isis* tracked the *Gwyndemere* on both sides, frighteningly close, hemming them in. James could hear the shouts and whoops of the pirates from their rocking decks.

"*REPANO!*" Barstow shouted, his voice straining.

"It's no use!" James called out, watching as the *Poseidon's Peril* filled his vision. The pirates on the deck had begun to scatter as the *Gwyndemere* bore down on them. Henrietta dove under the waves, preparing to swim under the other ship's long hull.

Below, Petra drew a deep breath. To James, she seemed eerily calm. She closed her eyes.

Deep beneath the deck, a dull clatter and a metallic clang sounded. The *Gwyndemere* lurched violently and rose onto the waves, buoyed up suddenly and virtually leaping out of the water. The steering pole loosened in James' grip, no longer bearing the full weight of Henrietta as she pulled the ship.

"Aha!" Barstow cried in disbelief. "The chain's repaired! Go! Go!"

James boggled, still looking up at the *Poseidon's Peril*. The *Gwyndemere* was rushing toward it, doomed to ram it in mere seconds.

"James!" Petra called. "How fast?"

James tore his eyes from the looming ship. "Eighty-five... just a little more...!"

"On my mark, mates!" Barstow bellowed, raising both hands.

"Eighty-eight!" James cried.

"*Pesceopteryx!*" Petra shouted, cupping her hands to her mouth again.

James repeated the incantation as loudly and accurately as he could, jerking the steering pole upright. Simultaneously, Barstow hollered an order to his mates in the ship's rigging. The response was immediate and shocking. Henrietta lunged forward, so quickly and powerfully that her entire

body angled up out of the water, trailed by a sparkling wreath of seawater. Two leathery shapes unfurled from her back and snapped open like parachutes, spraying fine mist. Henrietta, it seemed, had wings. She pumped them in one enormous, muscular stroke and shot up into the air, her long body streaming lithely over the deck of the *Poseidon's Peril*, covering it with her shadow. Pirates scattered, and some even leapt from the deck, dropping their cutlasses as they plummeted into the heaving ocean below.

On the *Gwyndemere*, every sail unfurled at once, suddenly and powerfully, creating a deep reverberating thump of captured wind. The complicated riggings unfolded and flexed, acting almost like wings, and the great ship heaved out of the ocean, following in Henrietta's path. James held his breath, but the rest of the crew hollered and whooped, their voices rising in the sudden, rushing silence.

The *Gwyndemere* soared over the *Poseidon's Peril*, so low that her wet hull crushed the other ship's deckhouse, smashing it to matchsticks. She plowed over the *Poseidon's* main mast, breaking it like a twig and forcing the unfortunate pirate ship to roll over in the water.

James clung to the steering pole, his hair streaming behind him and his eyes wide with a mixture of wonder and terror. Henrietta moved through the air ahead of the ship like a massive, scaly banner, her body flexing and sparkling greenly, her great membranous wings swooping easily, drawing streamers of water across the sky. Finally, gently, she angled downwards, furled her great wings, and dove to meet her long shadow on the waves. She made very little splash as she plunged into the depths. Behind her, however, the *Gwyndemere* landed like a whale, pounding the surface and sending up an explosion of dense white water, drenching James. A moment later, the crashing waters fell away and the ship cruised on sedately, her sails flapping in the ocean breeze.

"A job well done, James!" Barstow bellowed happily. "I told you we'd be in for a wee tussle, didn't I? Why, I'm tempted to recruit you to a life on the high seas, I am! Not everyone can air-pilot an Atlantean razorback their first time out! I was sure we were going to end up riding the *Poseidon* home piggyback!"

James flushed, his heart still thundering with adrenaline. "Well, I don't think they got away quite as undamaged as we seem to have," he called sheepishly.

Barstow angled toward the wrought iron stairs, patting Dodongo cheerfully on his enormous head. "Ah, they'll be fine," he replied, climbing up and trading seats with James. "It isn't the first time the *Poseidon*'s been turned turtle in the water. They'll have themselves a grand adventure of it, bashing their way through the hull into the sunlight, then repairing everything and turning her back over. Gives 'em something constructive to do for the rest of the day."

James felt himself grinning helplessly as he climbed down. Feeling slightly drunk on adrenaline, he angled over toward Dodongo and plopped down onto the edge of the cargo hold doors, resting his arm on the great ape's nose. He replayed the last few minutes in his head, not quite believing everything that had happened. Curiously, the thing that amazed him most was how Barstow had managed to repair the harness chain at the last possible moment. It had looked perfectly hopeless and James understood why: it would have been virtually impossible to see the broken harness chain under the waves, where it was being dragged by Henrietta. Furthermore,

doing magic through water, as Merlin had implied earlier, was extremely tricky. So how had Barstow managed it?

James' eyes widened as he remembered something. Moments before the chain had magically reattached to the ship, Petra had been standing on the prow, her eyes closed, as if in deep concentration. The last time James had seen anything like that had been...

"On the train," he muttered to himself. "On the Hogwarts Express with Merlin, when he'd made the tree grow beneath it, holding it up. But how could Petra...?"

He frowned to himself. Next to him, Dodongo stirred, pursing his lips and nodding James' arm off his nose.

James got up and looked around the deck, curious to ask Petra about what he had seen, but she was nowhere in sight. James found that he wasn't particularly surprised.



4. THE DREAM STORY

The crew of the *Gwynudemere* left the sails up now that the journey was fully underway. The wind filled them and helped propel the ship swiftly across the face of the ocean. For her own part, Henrietta drove through the water like a gigantic corkscrew, never slowing, her scales sparkling wherever her serpentine humps broke the surface, her serrated back slicing the waves neatly in two.

The day turned long, hot, and hazy bright. James, Ralph, Albus, and Lucy remained on the decks until tea, and then spent the rest of the afternoon in the galley dining room, playing Winkles and Augers or drawing at the long tables with Izzy. James was surprised at how good an artist Izzy was and how amazingly prolific her drawings were. Petra had provided sheets of cheap parchment for the girl as well as a collection of crayons and quills with magically coloured inks that never ran out.

It wasn't just that Izzy's strokes were so confident and swift as she created her pictures; the pictures themselves were hauntingly engaging, somehow simplistic and complex at the same time. Entire landscapes would be summed up in three or four quick lines, whereas a tree on a hilltop would require fifteen minutes of careful, dense detail, overlaid with half a dozen unusual colours,

creating something that almost seemed to hover on the parchment, or push past it, into some sort of invisible papery dimension. James tried studiously to mimic Izzy's style with no success.

Lucy sat across from them, her cheek resting on her forearm as she watched the blonde girl draw. "What's that one, Izzy?"

"It's the gazebo," Izzy answered without looking up. "The one in Papa Warren's lake."

"You mean *on* the lake?" Lily asked, peering across the table from her own artwork, which was much less expressive and decidedly happier, with a huge yellow sun smiling down on a simple rendition of the Burrow.

Izzy shrugged. "Either way. I only saw it once. But I remember it. I'm drawing it for Petra."

James leaned closer. There were two small figures standing in the gazebo, both girls, one taller than the other. Izzy had done a remarkably good job at representing both herself and Petra standing under the gazebo's low roof. James couldn't tell, however, if the gazebo was overlooking the lake, floating on it like a boat, or even submerged under its surface. Izzy wasn't a witch, of course, so her drawings didn't move, nonetheless there was something about the background of the gazebo picture that seemed to shift and pulse, just outside the range of vision. The drawing was strange and surreal, and James found he couldn't look at it for very long.

At the opposite end of the galley, Persephone Remora sat playing a complicated octocard game with one of her younger charges, a boy with lank black hair and pasty skin.

"Vampirates, I've no doubt," she said loftily, carefully covering one of the cards with her hand. When she lifted it, the card had turned over, revealing a picture of a capering, grinning skeleton. "I suspect they normally only hunt the ocean's face by moonlight, but it may well be that they smelled the presence of their kin. Perchance they meant for us to join them."

"Begging your pardon, Miss," one of the kitchen mates commented as he gathered the tea cups and spoons, "but there ain't no such thing as vampirates."

"I'm quite sure that that is what they would have you believe, sir," Remora sniffed delicately. "A secret and mysterious sect are they, known only to those who are doomed to be their prey."

The mate shrugged. "As you say, Miss. Person'ly, I always did find that a deadly reputation worked much better on the open sea than mysterious secrecy. Saves you having to prove yourself over and over to every new ship you chase after. Frankly, even if they do exist, life amongst your secret vampirates sounds like nothing but work, work, work, if you ask me."

"Excuse me," Remora said tiredly, rolling her eyes, "but I don't believe I did."

The young man sitting across from Remora sighed. "Mortals," he said under his breath, pretending that no one else could hear him. James saw the boy glance sideways, but James acted as if he hadn't noticed.

Eventually, after a dinner of lobster bisque, fresh sea cucumber, and Atlantean colossal clam pudding, James stood on the deck again and watched the sun dip into the distant watery horizon, turning huge and red as it went.

"Red sky at night, sailor's delight," Barstow said, crossing his forearms on the deck railing next to James. "But that sky doesn't look like anybody's delight to me. Too hot and still, like a beast lying in wait. What do you think, James?"

James shrugged, unsure how to respond.

"I smell a storm in the air," Barstow went on, nodding. "A big one, methinks. Not tonight, but in the morning maybe. Could be we'll pass beyond it in the dark. Or it could be that we'll need to be prepared for a bit of a blow tomorrow. I understand you played Treus in a school rendition of *The Triumvirate*. Is that right?"

James glanced at Barstow, who was grinning at him crookedly. James nodded sheepishly. "You've been talking to Albus. It was just a Muggle Studies production, so we didn't do any of the magical bits, or at least not with real magic. The storm was just a big fan and a painted backdrop."

Barstow nodded gravely. "But I bet it gave you some idea of how such things happen on the high seas. Don't you worry. This won't be any magical storm like what nearly overtook the fabled Treus and his crew. There's no Donovan in a jealous rage, whipping up any tempests for us to sail into. Still, even your average, run-o'-the-mill Atlantic squall can put a scare into an unwary traveler's soul. You'll be prepared to keep everyone calm since you've had a taste of it before, even if it *was* just a big fan and a painted backdrop. Am I right?"

James nodded and frowned seriously, gazing out over the waves.

On the horizon, the sun seemed to bleed and ripple, bloated deep red. And then, so swiftly that James thought he could see it happening, it slipped beneath the rim of the world. Darkness fell over the ship like a curtain, with no stars this time, and only a low moon, thin as a sickle, on the opposite horizon. Lanterns were lit on the masts, but their light didn't reach the water. The ship seemed to ply an invisible, cavernous lake, impossibly deep and full of mystery. Barstow went to take his shift on the brass chair at the ship's prow, and James bid him goodnight. Not liking being alone on the deck between that featureless black sky and bottomless, invisible ocean, James quickly descended into the comforting closeness and warm lantern-glow below-decks.

Quietly, he made his way to the tiny stateroom that he was sharing with his brother and Ralph. For now, the room was empty. Two sets of narrow bunks framed a single porthole with a sink below it. The porthole window was seamlessly black, like an onyx eye. James twitched the small curtain closed, then hunkered and pulled his duffle bag out from beneath the lower bunk on his right. A moment later, he clambered up to the top bunk, his wand lit and Petra's parchment parcel in his hand. He sat cross-legged in the center of the rough, woolen blanket, set the seamless packet onto the pillow, and tapped it with his glowing wand.

"*Revelierus*," he said carefully. Like an origami flower, the parchment blossomed, unfolding and spreading, until it had returned to its original form. A small sheaf of loose parchment, covered in Petra's neat, dense handwriting, lay on the pillow. James could read the title, written in larger,

flowing script along the top: *The Girl on the Dock*. It was underlined darkly, the lines embedded in the parchment, as if they had been made with a lot of force. James realized he was holding his breath. Slowly, he let it out, picked up the first page of Petra's dream story, and began to read.

The Girl on the Dock

It is the middle of the night. The moon is huge and high, reflecting off the surface of the lake. I lead Izzy by the hand, out of the woods and toward the shimmering lake. Suddenly she stops.

"I don't want to go there," she says.

"Why not?" I say. "It's only the lake".

"I just don't want to go, that's all," she replies, shaking her head.

She is afraid, yet I do not think she has seen the dagger I carry concealed in my other hand.

"It'll be alright, Iz," I say. "I'll hold your hand the whole time."

Izzy looks at the lake and then up at me with large, serious eyes and nods once. We continue toward the dock, but she stops again at the top step.

"I don't want to go any further, Petra."

"But I want to show you something," I say. I am surprised at her reluctance. I tighten my grip on her small hand and coax her down the stairs to the wooden planks of the dock.

"I don't want to see the gazebo," she says. "It's creepy. Please, Petra." I realize she has remembered the incident with the dead spiders; the day I saw my mother's face in the lake, the day I understood I could still bring her back, if only the sacrifice was great enough. The dead spiders were only enough to show me her reflection. To speak to her, I must offer something much more. I told Izzy that I was looking down in the water because I could see the old sunken gazebo in its watery grave, but she suspects more. She is unusually sharp in my presence. Her own mother would barely recognize her.

"It's not the gazebo that I want to show you," I tell her.

"What then?" she asks.

"My mother." I answer, and raise the dagger in one hand, Izzy's open palm in the other. She screams and begins to struggle, pulling away and trying to pry her hand out of mine.

"Stop fighting me, Iz," I plead. "It'll only hurt for a moment. Just a little blood...that's all. I need to talk to my mother! She'll tell me what to do, Iz. She'll tell us both."

Izzy is terrified and my words do not calm her. Some part of me knows I should stop, and yet I do not. I must finish the task. I grip her wrist and lower the dagger point.

Izzy screams again and pushes me. I lose my balance as I grab the wooden piling, dropping the dagger into the lake and releasing Izzy's hand. To my horror, she falls into the water with a loud splash and I suddenly remember that Izzy cannot swim.

"Izzy!" I cry out frantically, dropping to my knees on the dock. I hear her thrashing at the black water but I cannot see her. "Swim to me!" I shout and prepare to jump in after her.

"*No!*" I hear a voice in my thoughts say firmly. "*no... wait...*"

Izzy is flailing in the water and yet I remain there, watching.

"This was your intent all along.... The girl must die. Only then will you have peace."

I am frozen in place. I watch Izzy begin to sink beneath the dark water. I shake my head.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," I say. "It can't end this way."

"No one will know," the voice says soothingly. *"Her body will eventually be found. A tragic accident... You will mourn her properly. You, with your own mother at your side."*

I glance around the lake and look intently back toward the woods behind me.

"No one is coming," I say, amazed and surprised.

"No," the voice deep in my thoughts agrees, *"the boy James does not come this time. The misguided force of good has no voice here. 'Good' is a myth. There is only power. Nothing else matters."*

James stopped reading. His eyes were wide, shining in the wandlight, and his heart was pounding so hard that the parchment shook in his hands.

Merlin predicted this, he thought, nearly saying the words aloud. Back at the end of last term, when he, James, and James' dad had met in the Headmaster's office to discuss the aftermath of Petra's encounter with the Gatekeeper, Merlin had warned them that Petra's battle might not truly be over.

"Don't think that, despite her actions," he had said gravely, "she will not lie awake on cold, lonely nights, pining hopelessly for her dead parents, and wondering, wondering, if on that fateful night in the Chamber of Secrets she made the *wrong choice*."

Now, if any of what James was reading in Petra's dream story was true, he knew that she had indeed wondered those very things. According to the story, she was still haunted by the events of that night, and had subsequently seen her mother's face in the surface of the Morganstern Farm's lake, after she, Petra, had dropped some inexplicable load of dead spiders into it. The spiders functioned as a tiny sacrifice, giving Petra one more fleeting glimpse of what she had lost in the Chamber of Secrets.

Somehow, incredibly, Petra appeared to possess the power to recreate the Gatekeeper's awful bargain, only this time without any outside interference. Still, if the dream story was accurate, even then she had not consciously meant to sacrifice Izzy in order to retrieve her mother from the dead. She had meant only to offer the lake some of Izzy's blood, in order to simply talk to the vision of her mother, and hear her guidance. But then, apparently, things had gone very wrong, and the horrid voice of Voldemort had taken advantage of it, pushing Petra to commit the act she was meant to have committed in the Chamber of Secrets: the murder of another human being.

James was stunned, not so much by the power of the story, but by the nagging question: *how much of it was true?* He recalled the short bit of Petra and Merlin's conversation that he and the gremlins had listened in on with Ted's Extendable Ears. In it, Petra had referred to the dream, commenting that it was a reminder that one decision can have monumental repercussions. So where, in the dream story, did it stop reflecting what had actually happened on that night? How much of it was real, and how much was plain and simple nightmare? Obviously, Izzy had survived that night, either because she had never really fallen into the lake or because Petra had somehow managed to rescue her. But how? James furrowed his brow and bent over the pages again, reading on.

I look out over the water again. I can no longer see Izzy, but a figure is rising from the center of the lake. I can see, even in silhouette, that it is the shape I have so longed to see. My mother stands on the surface of the lake. She begins to walk to me, her arms outstretched, and yet I am torn. I cannot let Izzy die! I shake my head and peer down into the water, trying to find her with my thoughts. My wand is broken. I no longer remember how to do the magic without it but I must try. I raise my arms out over the water, close my eyes and concentrate.

"*What are you doing?*" the voice inside me asks.

"You are right," I answer, as firmly as I can. "No one is coming. *I* am being the voice of good. I am choosing it myself...." I force the figure of my mother from my mind. I focus on finding Izzy.

“Don’t be a fool!” The voice is becoming angry now. *“Once before you thought you had changed the course of destiny, yet here you are now. You have only postponed the inevitable.”*

I cannot sense Izzy in the depths of the lake but something is hidden in the darkness. It has been a long time since I have moved anything without my wand but I discover that the power is still there; buried but not forgotten. I direct all my energy to the object below.

Something in the water begins to move—something large. As a result, the figure of my mother slowly begins to sink again.

“You are not the only one with powers at your disposal....” The voice seethes at me. *“I am you and you are me. You cannot choose the light while I choose the dark!”*

My left hand is suddenly icy cold. Frosty tendrils extend from it out onto the lake toward the sinking figure of my mother, forming a narrow sheet of white ice. She rises again to the surface and walks toward me on the icy bridge. My power is divided and weakened. I cannot maintain my hold on the large object in the water.

“Give in!” the voice commands. *“Good is a myth! All that matters is power. Embrace your destiny or die fighting. You are not good. There is no such thing.”*

I look at the face of my mother. All I have to do is reach out and take her hand.

And suddenly I realize that I don’t care.

“Good is only a myth if good people stop believing in it,” I say out loud. “I may not be good but neither am I evil. Whichever direction I go is up to no one but me!” I feel warmth come over me. My hand is no longer cold. I close my eyes, concentrate and the object of my attention begins to rise once more toward the surface of the lake. I see the water mount up in a boil, slowly at first and then with a great surge. With a roar of falling water, the old gazebo lifts from the lake, resuming its original position at the end of the dock. It is waterlogged and draped with seaweed, but completely recognizable. And lying in the center of its rotten floor is Izzy.

I rush to her, kneel beside her, and push the wet hair back from her face. Her eyes are closed and she is not breathing.

“Izzy,” I whisper close to her ear. “I did it! I made the right choice, Iz.”

She does not move. I look at her pale face and touch her forehead.

“Please don’t be dead, Izzy,” I beg her. “Please...” I close my eyes and cast my mind into Izzy’s small body. I feel warmth inside her soul but she doesn’t respond. She has lost hope and is dwindling away. I cannot give up... I *will not* give up... I feel tears on my face and I try again.

"Come back, Izzy," I plead silently, speaking directly to that diminishing spark of her life. "Please come back."

There is no response. Izzy's eyes do not so much as flutter. I begin to panic. "Don't go Iz, I need you. You're all I have left. It shouldn't end this way. It can't end this way. Good will win out in the end. It has to..." I hold my sister in my arms and rock back and forth, searching for that spark. "No... No Iz... Don't be gone. Don't leave me alone..."

I open my eyes and look down at my sister's face...

Here, Petra's story stopped for a space of several lines. James looked at the blank space, but it wasn't entirely blank. Petra had begun to continue the story three more times, and then scribbled out the results, violently and completely, obliterating the shapes of her neat handwriting. The quill had leaked, leaving ragged black blots on the parchment. Finally, much more roughly, Petra's story continued.

Izzy lays in the darkness of the gazebo, cold and still, unmoving. The guttering spark of her life is gone. Izzy is dead. As dead as the gazebo. As dead as her dolls back in the bedroom of the farmhouse. Izzy is dead, and I am the one who has killed her.

"No," I insist. It can't end this way! I made the right choice! I fought the darkest desires of my soul, and overcame them, all by myself, with no outside intervention. I chose *good*. *Good owes* me!

"No...," I say again, raising my voice, "this isn't how it's supposed to turn out. You're supposed to be alive! This isn't how the story ends!" My voice is rising, both in pitch and volume. I stare down at the pathetic figure below me, refusing to believe what I see. Izzy's body lays in the center of the gazebo floor, soaked and limp, filthy on the rotten planks.

"No!" I scream now, scooping the small body into my arms. "NO!"

"Yes!" the voice in the backroom of my mind commands coldly. "*You cannot fight your destiny. You tried to in the chamber of the pool, and you tried to tonight, and yet... fate prevails! You and I are one! Give in to your powers. Embrace the paths you have opened. It is too late to turn back now. All that is left is power, but that is not a bad thing. In time, you will come to accept what happened here tonight. In time, you will be glad of it, for it makes you who you are, who you were meant to be from the very beginning. Fight it no more. You are tired of fighting, aren't you? Now, at the end, you see that fighting was always futile. Fighting your destiny only destroys you, and all that you love. Embrace it now. Embrace it, and perhaps destiny will repay you. After all, the path of power has many, many benefits...*"

I listen to the voice. I am helpless not to. For the first time, I listen, and I do not argue with it. The voice is right. There is no fighting my destiny. What had been meant to happen in the Chamber of Secrets had not been prevented, only postponed. I gained nothing by choosing good, succeeded only in raising the price that I must inevitably pay. Now, Izzy is dead, and good is annihilated. The voice is right. All that is left is the path of power.

I stand slowly, lifting the light body of my murdered sister. I will bury her, in the woods, beneath the cairn that represents her. And then I will leave. I don't know where I will go or what I will do, but I have a strong feeling that those decisions will mysteriously take care of themselves. Suddenly, it is almost as if I am merely a passenger in my own mind. My body seems to move of its own accord, carrying me back along the dock, my sister's cold body dripping lake water in my arms. I am glad to give in. It is too hard to fight, too hard to think. Destiny has claimed me, and I am happy now to relinquish control to it. What is left now to fight for anyway?

In the darkness overlooking the lake, the great old tree stands in Grandfather Warren's field, its leaves whispering like a thousand voices.

Sometimes, I can still hear those voices. Even when I am awake.

James dropped the last page onto the small sheaf of parchments. He was shaking and his forehead was beaded with sweat in the dark confines of the upper bunk. His mind raced as he considered the remarkable, inexplicable implications of the story.

If any of it was true at all, then how had Petra performed the magic? In the story, she admitted that she had broken her own wand, for reasons James couldn't begin to guess. So how had she performed a feat as amazing as levitating a long-sunken gazebo out of a lake? Obviously, that part simply couldn't have actually happened. But then, James remembered the events of that very morning, remembered how Petra had simply closed her eyes, as if in deep thought, and then, a moment later, how Henrietta's harness chain had magically reattached to the ship, allowing them to escape the pirates' trap.

James tried to remember if Petra had had her wand in her hand at the time and realized he couldn't. Frankly, he couldn't remember seeing Petra's wand even once since her arrival at the Potter home, months earlier. But that was simply crazy, wasn't it? No witch or wizard could do magic without their wand, at least not anything specific or meaningful. There had to be a reasonable explanation for it, and James had a strong feeling that it all revolved around the question of which parts of Petra's dream story were true and which parts were just that: a dream.

I think she asks me to come because she needs me here to prove that the dreams aren't true, Izzy had said the night before, while Petra had still been writing. She needs me here to prove that I'm still alive.

In James' memory, Izzy's words mingled with those of Professor Trelawney, the horrible prophecy she had made on the morning that he had left Hogwarts: *The fates have aligned... night will fall, and from it, there will be no dawn, no dawn, save the dawn of forever fire...*

Strangely, powerfully, James felt a deep sense of fear and doom. It hovered over him like a shroud, almost like the pall of a Dementor. He shook himself, and then, almost desperately, tapped the parchments again with his wand, closing them once again into the seamless, featureless packet, hiding Petra's words, shutting off the voice of Professor Trelawney in his memory.

He jammed the packet of parchment under his pillow and leapt down to the floor, hungry for light, for the sane babble of the voices of his friends and family. He very nearly slammed the door to his stateroom as he entered the narrow corridor, heading for the galley. Ralph and Lucy would be there, as would Albus and Lily, his parents, Neville Longbottom, and the rest. What James wanted most was to tell someone what he had read, but of course he couldn't. He had promised Petra that he would keep her secret.

Perhaps she would be in the galley, though, as well. Maybe he could tell her, and ask her about what was in the dream story, find out how much of it was real, and how much (hopefully most of it!) was just a dream. Suddenly, he wanted that more than anything.

But Petra wasn't in the galley. A cursory look around the decks and the narrow corridors revealed no sign of either her or Izzy. Apparently they were in bed already.

Later, however, James would wonder otherwise.



The next morning dawned hazy and bright, still as a tomb. The ocean was nearly flat, with barely a breath of breeze to disturb it, so that the wake of the *Gwynudemere* lay like a highway behind her, spreading into the shimmering distance. Henrietta plowed on, her great scaly head occasionally breaking the surface and flinging fans of water all around.

"The doldrums," Barstow explained to James, Ralph, and Lucy after breakfast. The four stood on the bow, watching another mate operate the steering pole on its brass chair. "Technically, it's where a bunch of huge Atlantic currents all meet and cancel each other out, making a sort of dead space in the middle of the ocean. But it's more'n that if you ask an old sailor like me. It's a cursed

place. If Davey Jones really does have a locker, it's right below our feet, fathoms down, in the still darkness of the deepest deeps."

"Cheerful stuff, that," Ralph commented, shaking his head.

"It *is* pretty queer, when you think about it," Lucy said, leaning on the railing and looking down toward the shadow of the ship on the rushing, leaden water. "It's almost like we're floating on a cloud, high up over some alien, hidden landscape. Who knows what wild creatures live down there, not even knowing there *is* a surface, much less magical ships that can scoot along the top of it, sitting on the mysterious boundary between the air above and the secret world below. Puts things into perspective, in a way, don't you think?"

Merlin had approached along with Harry, Neville Longbottom, and Percy Weasley. The Headmaster smiled faintly at Lucy but didn't say anything.

"So," James asked, looking between the three men, "where were *you* lot yesterday morning when we were getting squeezed between three pirate ships like a walnut in a giant nutcracker?"

"We were below-decks, as per instructions," Merlin said mildly, still smiling that strange, small smile. "You must understand: we are at sea. Here, the word of the captain is law. As adults, *we* are in the habit of abiding by the law."

James shook his head. "Fat lot of help you'd have been if we hadn't gotten Henrietta's harness fixed at the last second. We'd have been caught by pirates, and then who knows what would have happened?"

"Worse fates have befallen people on the high seas, James," Neville replied, patting the boy on the shoulder. "I suspect everything would have turned out all right, no matter what. After all, we're hardly carrying a shipment of Galleons for the World Wizarding Bank in New Amsterdam, are we?" He blinked and turned aside to Harry. "Are we?"

Percy shook his head. "I assure you, James, and the rest of you, everything was entirely under control at all times."

James leaned against the railing next to Lucy. "Sure didn't seem like it when we were flying over that last pirate ship, smashing its masts like tenpins," he muttered. "But whatever you say."

"So what do you think those pirates *were* after us for?" Lucy asked quietly as the adults meandered away, talking in low voices.

"Well, it wasn't to ask us all to come over for crumpets and tea, that's for sure," James said darkly. "Barstow himself seemed pretty surprised by it. Seemed to say that it was pretty unusual for so many pirates to work together at once. I bet you a Galleon that my dad, Merlin, Professor Longbottom, and the rest of the grownups know a lot more about this than they're letting on."

"Well, that's their job, I guess," Ralph sighed. "And they're welcome to it." In a different voice, he added, "I hear we'll be landing in America by teatime tomorrow! I can hardly wait, can't you?"

Lucy nodded. "I'm ready to get land under my feet again even if it isn't home."

"You'll love the States," Ralph said confidently. "It's totally cool there. Way different, especially in the cities. You can get food from all over the world on nearly every corner. And there's Bigfeet, and old Native American magic, and loads of amazing wizarding places. There's even a crystal mountain that you can't even see until you just about bump into it. Even the Muggles told stories about that one, up until the American Magical Administration made it unplottable, a hundred years ago or so."

"Bah," Albus said grumpily, stumping up and plopping down onto a bench built into the railing. "None of it will be as cool as Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. Who needs a stupid old crystal mountain? Or Bigfeet for that matter?"

"I think they prefer the term 'Sasquatches,'" Lucy said carefully. "Or Bigfoots, even though it sounds a little odd, grammatically."

"Stupid apes can't even talk," Albus groused. "They can start telling me what to call them when they can say it in plain English."

"That's rather speciesist," Lucy commented, but without much conviction. "What's got you in such a foul mood?"

Albus rolled his eyes. "Mum just yelled at me for making a racket in the hallway. Me and Lily and Molly. We were just playing Winkles and Augers. I don't see what the big deal is."

"You were playing Winkles and Augers with Lily and Molly?" Ralph said, frowning. "But they aren't even in school yet. Do they even have wands?"

James smiled ruefully. "Albus' attitude toward the rules is pretty loose. He got both girls some cheap toy wands from Gorleone's Novelties last time we were in Diagon Alley and he taught them some basic levitation, just so he has *somebody* to play Winkles with that he can actually *beat*."

"I beat *you* last time we played," Albus countered, raising his eyebrows challengingly. "Don't pretend I didn't."

"That's because *you* kept on playing after Mum called us for lunch and I went downstairs!" James cried, tossing his hands into the air.

"S'not against the rules, is it?" Albus replied evenly. "I mean, I could have just claimed you'd forfeited. I gave you the benefit of the doubt." To Ralph, he grinned and added, "I won, two hundred and seventy-eight to five."

"You can't play Winkles properly in a hallway as narrow as the corridors below-decks anyway," Lucy said, leaning back on the railing. "But besides that, why would your mum care? It's not like anyone's asleep or anything."

Albus shrugged, bored with the topic by now. "Apparently Petra doesn't feel well. She's got seasickness or something. She and Izzy are in their cabin resting. We were at least two doors down from them anyway."

"Petra's sick?" James clarified, glancing at his brother. "Really?"

Ralph said, "You seem surprised. Lots of people get sick on boats. I'm surprised *I'm* not sick."

"You still have one more day," Lucy commented reasonably. Ralph nodded.

"I'm a little surprised, yeah," James said, furrowing his brow. "Petra just doesn't seem like the seasick type."

"So maybe it isn't seasickness then," Albus exclaimed, annoyed. "Maybe she has rickets. Or scurvy. Who cares? She'll be fine by tomorrow night, won't she?"

Ralph nodded thoughtfully. "Barstow says sailors used to be called 'limeys' because eating limes and oranges and stuff was a great way to keep from catching rickets out on the high seas, for some reason. Has Petra been eating any limes?"

"She doesn't have rickets, you prat," Lucy said, shaking her head.

"I bet there's some limes in the galley," Albus said, brightening. "We could take her some. You want to?"

"Just leave her alone, like Mum said, why don't you?" James said, raising his voice a little. "Lucy's right. Whatever she has, limes aren't going to fix it. Just leave her be."

"Oh, that's right," Albus said, rolling his eyes again. "Treus has to look out for his dear Astra. How could I forget? By the way, has she professed her 'deep and abiding love' for you yet? No? Ah well."

James sighed and shook his head. He was used to his brother's ribbing by now. He looked toward the mid-ship stairs, wondering if he should go down and check on Petra. Reluctantly, he decided not to. His mum was probably right. If Petra didn't feel well, it would probably be best if they just left her alone. Petra would ask for help if she needed it.

Later that afternoon, however, as the sky lowered and turned ashy grey, James was surprised to see Petra and Izzy walking the decks. He saw the two of them from across the ship, he on the bow, and them on the high, angled floor of the stern, strolling slowly, hand in hand. He angled toward the mid-ship stairs, trying to move as casually as he could, hoping they wouldn't come up the other side of the ship while he was aiming to meet them on the stern. He didn't want it to appear that he was following them although that was exactly what he was doing.

By the time he got to the stern, however, neither of the girls was in sight. He looked around carefully, and then turned back to peer over the length of the ship. Apparently, Petra and Izzy had gone back below-decks again. He frowned and shook his head. Far ahead of the ship, the sky was turning a deep, bruised colour, darkening and condensing. It was a storm, just as Barstow had predicted, and the ship seemed to be heading right for it. As James thought this, a high wind twirled over the ship, threading through his hair and singing a high, momentary whine in the ship's rigging. James shuddered.

After a moment's consideration, he headed back down the stern and toward the stairs. There was no point in being on deck for a storm if he didn't have to be.

Even if it would probably be rather exciting.



"Make sure all of your things are well-secured," Barstow said, stopping momentarily in the doorway. "Including yourselves. Find something solid to hold onto, and do so. Also, keep a bucket handy. Believe it or not, you're much more prone to seasickness below-decks, where you can't see the waves. There'll be enough of a mess to clean up topside afterwards without having to worry about any messes down here, if you take my meaning."

James sat next to Molly and Lucy on a small bench in the captain's quarters, near the bank of curving stern windows. "Well, at least we can watch it from here," he said somberly. "If we want to."

Ralph shook his head. "I've never seen the sky look that colour. That can't be natural."

"So much for calm seas," Lucy agreed, leaning into the purplish-grey window light. "Those look less like waves and more like the Scottish Highlands."

James peered out the window next to her and saw that it was true. Unbroken by any shoreline, the waves swelled to nearly geological heights. At one moment, the view beyond the window seemed to look down from a high peak, overlooking a valley of sloshing, white-capped foothills. At the next moment, the ship would fall into the shadow of that very valley, buried in a trough of steely water and surrounded by marching oceanic mountains. James' stomach rolled with the motion of the waves and he looked away again, back to the comforting confines of the captain's quarters. Lanterns swung from the ceiling and tools rolled back and forth on the desk, striking the low railings that surrounded its surface.

"James," his mum said from across the room. Lily sat on her lap, leaning comfortably back against her mother's shoulder. Ginny glanced sharply at her son. "Did you close my trunk and batten it down when you were done getting the sweaters out?"

James sighed wearily. "I don't know, Mum. Yeah, sure, I guess so."

"Guess so' isn't good enough, James," Ginny said sternly. She was nervous, James knew, and nervousness made her strident. "I have a whole collection of shampoo and perfume and hand cream vials in there, not to mention your father's travel potions bag. If that gets knocked over, it'll cause no end of mess, and if those potions of your father's break..."

"It'll be fine, Mum, quit worrying," James replied.

"Go on, James," his father said from where he stood next to Merlinus by the captain's desk. "Run along before the waves get any worse. And bring me back that apple on the bedside table, if you would."

"Ugh," Audrey commented, clinging to Percy where they sat at a dark corner table. "How can you eat at a time like this?"

"I'm hungry," Harry shrugged as James passed him. "And James..."

James stopped in the doorway, holding onto the frame to keep his balance on the swaying floor. "Yeah, Dad?"

"Leave my Invisibiliy Cloak in the trunk when you close it, eh?" Harry said, nodding and smiling a little crookedly.

James shook his head wearily but Albus crowed laughter from across the room.

The narrow corridor seemed to lean from side to side as James maneuvered through it. The stairs at the end of the passage were lit with swaying light from the window in the door above. James stumbled into his parents' stateroom and saw that he had, in fact, left the trunk open and unsecured on the low table at the end of the bed. He clunked the lid closed and pulled the leather straps over it, looping them through a pair of brass hooks attached to the table, which was itself bolted to the floor. He glanced around and saw the apple his dad had asked for. It rolled back and forth in a bowl on the bedside table. Grabbing it, James turned and lurched back toward the stateroom door. He felt like he was walking uphill. A moment later, he stumbled through the door and caught himself against the corridor wall as the hill inverted, rolling beneath him. He looked at the apple in his hand and groaned, seeing that he had bruised it quite severely against the paneled wall.

A gust of air whistled through the corridor, bringing sea mist and the roar of the waves with it. James glanced to the side, up the corridor stairs, and saw that the door above had been pushed open, showing low, heaving storm clouds. A figure was silhouetted against the light, and James saw, with some surprise, that it was Petra. As he watched, she stepped out, letting the door blow shut behind her with a slam. Quickly, and without thinking, he followed her.

Wind pulled the door open the moment he thumbed the latch, nearly wrenching it from his hand. Sailors' voices called thinly beneath the roar of the waves, the whoosh of the wind, and the creaking groans of the ship. Mist blew over the deck-like sand, scouring it and making James squint as he looked around, scanning the narrow mid-ship walkway for Petra. He finally saw her, moving serenely up onto the stern, her dress whipping about her legs and a cloak flapping from her shoulders.

James stepped around the door and the wind changed, sucking it shut behind him so hard that he thought the glass window embedded in it might break. It didn't, fortunately. James hunched his shoulders and moved as quickly as he could along the walkway toward the stern stairway, following Petra.

Amazingly, he found her leaning on the high, stern railing, her forearms crossed in front of her, as if she was deep in thought. He approached her, calling out her name.

She looked at him over her shoulder, and smiled wanly. Her dark hair whipped and flailed about her face. "Hi James," she called back, raising her voice against the wind. She turned back to the ocean beyond.

"What are you doing up here, Petra?" James asked, moving alongside her and gripping the railing for support. "You should be below, with the rest of us."

"Did you read it?" Petra responded, ignoring James' question.

James nodded. "Yeah! I read it, already. I did it last night, but I couldn't find you when I was done. I wanted to talk to you about it, but..."

"I'm glad you read it," she said, still studying the monstrous waves beyond the railing. "It's important that someone else know the truth."

James looked aside at her. He knew he should get her below-decks, but he couldn't stop himself from asking the one question that he was most curious about, now that she had brought it up.

"What *is* the truth, Petra?" he asked, leaning forward. Something glimmered faintly on Petra's cloak and James saw that it was an opal brooch. She had only recently begun to wear it, and James could only guess that it had some special meaning for her. "What part of your dream story really happened? What part of it is true?"

Petra looked at him, her eyebrows raised slightly. "Why, all of it, James. All of it is true."

James shook his head, frowning into the misty wind. "That doesn't even begin to make any sense! I mean, in the story, Izzy dies! She's downstairs right now, alive as can be. We should be there too. Come on!"

Petra didn't move. "Oh, Izzy died all right. I killed her. Just because it didn't happen in this life, doesn't mean it didn't happen. You see, I'm sick, James."

James glanced back toward the heaving, rolling ship. Waves towered around it, casting it into their massive shadows. Men clung to the riggings, securing the sails. Far ahead, barely visible in the rushing mist, Barstow sat hunkered in the brass chair, wrestling with the steering pole, turning Henrietta into the waves. "I know," James said. "Mum told us you were seasick. Being up here won't help."

"I'm not seasick, James," Petra replied mildly. "It has nothing to do with the sea. Or maybe it has everything to do with the sea. It's just so... dead out here. Dead in the middle of everything, so very far away from home; from life and people and the noise of living. Here, there's no distractions from the dream. Here, the dream is just as real as reality. There's nothing I can do to shut it off."

James was becoming frightened, both by the storm and by Petra's strange words. "Let's go down below-decks, Petra," he said, touching the girl's elbow. "We can talk about it more down there. You can tell me what really happened on the night you took Izzy out to the lake. All right?"

Petra looked at him again, her eyes bright, searching. She sighed deeply. "Izzy lived. That's what happened. That's what I remember, at least. And it has to be true, doesn't it? Like you said, Izzy is here with us, alive and well. She lived. My mother fell back into the water when I brought Izzy back up out of the lake, carried in the sunken gazebo. I betrayed the resurrection of my mother to save my sister, and I'm glad I did. It was the right thing to do and I'll never struggle with that horrible, *awful* bargain again. But I *did* sacrifice *somebody* to the lake. Hardly anyone knows it. Damien, and Sabrina, and Ted. They saw what happened. What they don't know, though, is that we did it together, Izzy and me. We sacrificed Phyllis, Izzy's own mother, to the lake. We sent the Wishing Tree after her, made it carry her into the water, Izzy and I together, because Phyllis didn't deserve to live, not after what she had done to Izzy. Not after... Grandfather Warren..."

James frowned at Petra and shook his head. "I don't understand!" he called. The storm caught his words and bowled them away into the waves. "That can't be true, either! Izzy isn't even a witch! She's a Muggle, Petra! She can't do magic."

Petra shook her head slowly, distractedly. "She isn't a Muggle. She's a Muddle. She's caught right in the middle. Just like me."

James took Petra by the arm now, tugging her toward the stairs. "Tell me down below-decks, okay? You're going to be fine. Everything's going to be fine. Just come on with me, all right?"

Petra was still shaking her head. "Everything *isn't* going to be fine," she said, her voice rising in pitch, wavering. James was dismayed to realize she was afraid, nearly to the point of tears. "Everything isn't going to be fine at all. Don't you see? I didn't change the bargain. I just changed the conditions. I didn't sacrifice Lily, or Izzy. I sacrificed *Phyllis*, with Izzy's help. Because of that, I didn't get my mother back. But I got *something*. I sense it. Something... *someone*... came up out of the lake. I thought I could escape her, but I can't. The dream is coming from her, like slow poison. I caused her to be, and now... and now..."

"Petra!" James said, shaking her and making her look at him. "We have to get below now! The storm! We can talk about this later, all right? I don't understand what you are saying, but it doesn't matter right now. You have to come down and be with Izzy! She needs you!"

That seemed to get Petra's attention. She blinked at him, as if coming out of a mild trance. She nodded. "You're right, James. Of course. I'm sorry. Let's go."

James nodded with relief. Taking Petra's hand, he turned and began to lead her back toward the mid-ship stairs.

A crack of thunder cleaved the sky overhead and a bolt of blinding lightning struck the aft mast, splitting it in two. Lashing burst loose with a series of high twangs and the mast began to topple, groaning and swinging sideways. James watched with horror, ducking and pulling Petra with him, but there was nothing he could do. The mast spun unpredictably, still trapped in the rigging,

and fell to the deck with a shuddering crash. One of the mast's arms swept over James' head, brushing his hair. A split second later, Petra's hand was wrenched from his.

"Petra!" he shouted, scrambling backwards, his eyes wild. The angle of the mast arm had scooped Petra clean off the deck. James' heart leapt into his throat and he threw himself toward the stern railing, his feet slipping on the wet deck. The mast had crushed part of the railing as it fell on it. Now, half of the broken mast jutted out over the waves, caught in a web of torn sail and rigging. Petra clung to the outside of the railing, tangled in the mast's rigging. Slowly, the weight of the mast pulled her away from the railing and she began to lose her grip.

James leapt forward and grabbed Petra's arm just as she slipped loose. She clutched his wrist as she fell away, yanking him forward so that he nearly went over the edge himself. He struggled to hold onto the railing with one hand while Petra dangled from the other.

"Petra!" he cried down to her. "I can't hold on much longer! Climb up!"

"I'm caught!" she called back, and James saw it. The rigging was still tangled around her ankle, binding her to the broken mast. Behind James, horribly, a huge splintering crackle sounded. The mast dipped precipitously as it broke further away from the ship. Ropes twanged as they snapped, and the tip of the mast speared the waves, bowing under their weight.

"Use your wand!" James hollered down, his voice thin in the pounding wind. "Break the ropes with your wand!"

Petra hung from one wet hand, slipping slowly as the mast dragged her toward the mountainous waves. "I don't have a wand," she said, almost to herself. She looked down, examining the stormy ocean below, and then, suddenly, she gasped. "My brooch!" she cried out. She patted at her cape frantically with her free hand, searching. "My father's brooch! Where did it go? Oh no!"

"Petra!" James yelled, raising his voice as loudly as he could. "You have to use your powers! The ones you used in the dream story! Break the ropes with your mind! Do it now! Quickly!"

Petra didn't seem to hear him. The ship rolled horribly as the waves towered over it, crashing now over the decks. The sky loomed and swayed overhead. It had begun to rain.

"Let me go, James," Petra said, raising her eyes to him. They were calm and dark in the stormlight.

"What!?" James called back, redoubling his grip on her wrist. She was slipping away, and James realized that she was loosening her grasp on him.

She shook her head faintly. Her pale face looked earnestly up at him. "Let me go. This is how it is supposed to end. This will fix everything, balance it all back out again. This will send the dreams back into the water, where they belong. Let me go join my father's brooch. It's the only way. Let me go."

"I can't do that!" James cried, struggling desperately to maintain his grip on Petra's wrist. "I have to save you! I can't just let you go! I can't!"

"You can," Petra said. It was a request. "James, if you care about me, you can. You can let go."

"No!" James screamed, but it was going to happen whether he wanted it to or not. The rigging tangled around Petra's ankle was pulling her down, towed by the broken mast as it sank into the waves. An ominous creak sounded behind James as the mast began to tear away, taking part of the deck with it. There was no fighting the force of the storm. It wanted Petra, and it meant to have her.

Petra's fingers began to uncurl from James' wrist.

"NO!" James cried again, leaning forward, fighting to hold her, panic ripping through him. "Petra! No!"

She let go, and his fingers slipped, collapsed onto nothing as she dropped away, still looking up at him, her face calm in the raging darkness.

"UGH!" James cried out involuntarily as something deep inside him tugged, horribly and suddenly, nearly yanking him over the railing once more. His eyes clamped shut at the pain of it, even as he braced himself against the railing. Something was pulling him from the inside, as if a cord ran straight through him and ended in his gut, anchored there by some powerful, unshakable force. It hurt. "Ugh!" he cried out again, and finally opened his eyes.

Petra was still dangling below him, but much further down now, so that waves roared up over her legs and hips. She stared up at him, her face shocked, wide-eyed. Between her hand and his, a glowing silver cord trembled, thin as thread but apparently very strong. So strong, James sensed, that it was very nearly unbreakable. It was magic, but not like any magic James had ever known, or even heard of. It was *Magic*, deep and powerful, coming from outside of him, like a current of electricity so huge and potent that it could kill him if he wasn't careful. The silvery thread came from the center of his palm, trembling and humming. He wrapped his fingers around it tightly.

Petra raised her voice, crying up to him against the noise of the storm. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know!" James hollered back. "But I don't think I can stop it! You have to climb up! I'll pull you!"

"I can't!" Petra answered. "My ankle's still caught! It'll pull us both under!"

As she spoke, the mast crackled and splintered further. With a low creak and groan, it began to pull away from the ship, finally letting loose.

"Use your Magic!" James yelled. "Like you did the other morning! When you fixed the harness chain! I know it was you, just like in the dream story! *Do it Petra! Now!*"

Far below, Petra nodded. She closed her eyes as the waves rose and fell around her. Thunder and lightning blasted overhead, but the silver cord held strong, connecting Petra and James, glowing like a filament of starlight. Barely audible beneath the roar of the storm, a twang of breaking rope sounded and Petra grew suddenly lighter, buoying up out of the rolling waves. With a sustained shudder and a monstrous noise, the mast fell away from the ship. It crashed into the waves beneath

Petra, sending up a deluge of grey water. Petra swung as she began to climb the glimmering thread, and James pulled her up, surprised at his own strength. It was as if power flowed into his arms from the thread itself, and still it tugged at his center, as if the thread's end wrapped around his very soul. For all he knew, it did.

Moments later, James helped Petra clamber over the broken railing. She collapsed against him, sodden and exhausted, and he stumbled backwards, barely able to hold himself up.

"What in the name of Neptune's ruddy trident is going on back here?" a voice bellowed. Footsteps sounded on the deck and hands grabbed at James and Petra, helping them up. James didn't recognize the sailors, but he recognized the look of annoyed alarm on their faces. The sailors hadn't seen what had happened at the rear of the ship. They only knew that lightning had struck their aft mast, breaking it off into the sea, and now, on top of everything, here were a couple of teenaged passengers mucking about on the deck during an Atlantic storm.

"Get below-decks!" one of the sailors cried out, pointing. "What, are you both totally daft? Go on!"

James nodded, and then turned to look at Petra. He still had her hand, although the strange silver cord seemed to have faded away. Or perhaps it had simply gone invisible. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

She didn't answer. Instead, she turned and looked back, toward the rolling, stormy waves beyond the stern railing.

"Goodbye father," she said in a faint voice. She shuddered and her eyes were wide, wet with exhausted tears. "Goodbye. I'm sorry."



5. NEW AMSTERDAM

“So what happened out there anyway?” Albus asked quietly.

James lay in his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. The ship still creaked ominously as it rocked, but the brunt of the storm had finally passed. The thump of footsteps could be heard from the decks above as the crew attempted to repair what was left of the stern mast.

“James?” It was Ralph this time, from the bunk across the narrow room. “You asleep over there?”

“No.”

“So what gives? What really happened?”

James sighed. “Apparently you lot saw it all from the stern windows in the captain’s quarters. You tell me.”

“Hah,” Albus laughed derisively. “We hardly got to see anything before Merlin got involved. We heard the mast fall over and saw bits of it go over the side, and then we saw Petra’s feet hanging down, swinging back and forth with the ropes all tangled up in them. Mum let out a scream, and that’s when Merlin came up and put the lights out.”

"I don't get it," James said, rolling over and looking at Ralph in the opposite bunk. "Why did he pull the curtains?"

Ralph screwed up his face thoughtfully. "That's not what he did. He came forward and stood in front of the window, spreading out his arms, and he said something in that weird language of his. Old Celtic, I guess. Rose would probably know what it meant. Next thing we know, the windows had all gone completely dark, like they'd been covered in black paint. I guess he didn't want us to see it if Petra was going to fall. I mean, Izzy was there, after all. Petra's her sister."

"Thanks for the explanation," James said, sighing.

"So tell us!" Albus insisted. "What happened?"

James shook his head on his pillow. "She fell. That's all. Lightning struck the mast at the back of the ship, right next to us. It fell over and knocked Petra over the side. She hung onto the railing until I got over there and grabbed her."

Albus shifted on his bunk, squeaking the thin mattress. "What was she doing up on deck in the first place? Didn't she know there was a bloody hurricane going?"

"I don't know," James said. He meant to go on, to try to explain, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, he let the silence spin out, telling its own story.

"I'll tell you one thing," Albus commented, "she's been a little odd ever since she showed up at our place, earlier this summer. Whatever happened back at her grandparents' farm, I think it knocked a few owls loose in her owlery, if you know what I mean."

"Shut up, Al," James said. He felt his face heating, but he tried not to let it show in his voice. "You don't know anything about it. So just shut up."

Ralph rolled over and rested his chin on his forearm, peering across the darkened room. "Well, that's kind of the point, isn't it? Hardly anybody knows what happened there. I mean, there's Damien, Sabrina, and Ted, but they sure aren't talking. Merlin's orders. Whatever happened, it had to have been pretty ugly. Both of Petra's grandparents ended up dead."

"Phyllis wasn't Petra's grandmother," James announced darkly. "She was just the woman Petra's grandfather married, and she was perfectly horrid. Whatever happened to her, she got what she deserved."

The bed beneath James squeaked again as Albus moved around on it. A moment later, his head appeared next to James' bunk, peering up at him. "You know something, don't you? Tell!"

"I don't know anything. Shut up and go to sleep, you berk."

Albus stared at him critically.

Across the room, Ralph said, "I don't know what this Phyllis woman was supposed to have done, but she was Izzy's mum, at least. I mean, maybe there was a good reason, maybe there wasn't, but it's a pretty strong thing to say that death was what she deserved."

"Well, Petra isn't in Azkaban, is she?" James replied angrily. "Obviously whatever happened, nobody's blaming her for it."

"Or nobody can prove that she did it," Albus added, still studying James' face.

James threw off the covers and shoved Albus aside. He leapt nimbly to the floor and pulled the door open, letting in the light from the corridor.

"Hey," Ralph called, "where are you going?"

"Out," James replied, not turning back. "That's all. Don't follow me."

He pulled the door closed and stalked along the narrow corridor, fuming and confused. When he reached the stairs to the main deck, he turned toward them and climbed to the door, which was propped open, letting in the night air.

The deck was wet beneath James' bare feet. He peered back toward the stern and saw deckhands moving about by lantern-light, using their wands to repair what remained of the stern mast. Sighing, James turned toward the bow stairs and climbed up, glad that this end of the ship, at least, seemed dark and relatively deserted.

The mate seated in the brass steering chair sang jauntily to himself, clutching a pipe between his teeth. Between stanzas, the mate puffed, and the orange glow of the pipe's flame was the only light to be seen. James kept behind the mate and moved toward the railing, which he leaned on. The ocean was nearly invisible in the darkness, but for the phantom-like shapes of the whitecaps. Waves thumped against the hull as Henrietta plowed relentlessly onward.

James' thoughts were a blur. The events of the night played over and over in his head, stranger and more mysterious with each remembrance. Petra's words had been frightening enough, but they had paled in comparison to the nightmare of the falling mast and the horrors that had followed. He recalled the sad certainty of her voice as she'd told him to let her go, to let her fall into the ocean, following after the enigmatic lost brooch, as if that was something he could ever, in a million years, allow to happen. The worst part of all, however, had been that moment—that one, crystalline instant of perfect understanding—when he knew that Petra, the girl he loved, was going to die.

And then, to no one's greater shock than his own, he, James, had conjured the mysterious silver thread, the one that had connected him to her, saving her from the reaching waves. Yesterday evening, Barstow had said that the storm that was coming was not like the one in *The Triumvirate*. *This won't be any magical storm*, he had said, *like what nearly overtook the fabled Treus and his crew*. Now, however, James couldn't help wondering.

Footsteps sounded on the wet deck, nearby. James didn't look up. He hoped that whoever it was would simply pass him by. Instead, he heard the figure approach him, felt the warmth of the person as they leaned against the railing next to him, nearly invisible in the stormy darkness.

"Are you doing all right?" a voice asked quietly. It was his dad.

James sighed deeply. "Yeah. I guess."

Together, they watched the marching shapes of the whitecaps, moving like ghosts alongside the ship. After a minute, his dad spoke again. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

James thought about it. Finally, he said, "Petra's sick, Dad. But not sick like Mum thinks. She's not well. In her thoughts. I think she... I think she came up on the deck tonight... because she wanted something to happen to her."

Harry Potter nodded slowly. His glasses glinted softly as the moon finally peeked through the tattering clouds. "I've spoken to Merlinus about it," he said. "The Headmaster has been... watching her."

"What's the matter with her?" James asked, looking aside at his father. "Does Merlin know? Is she going to be all right?"

Harry turned his head toward James and smiled slightly. "I'll tell you the truth, son. I don't know. But she's been through an awful lot. It will take time for her to work through it all. Be patient. Be her friend."

James sighed again, turning away. "I don't even know how to do that much. Every time I talk to her, I get... I don't know..." He shrugged and shook his head.

Harry's smile widened a little and he bumped James with his shoulder. "I know how you feel, son. Don't worry. The words will come when they need to. Just like they did tonight."

"What do you mean?" James asked, glancing back at his father.

Harry shrugged. "I heard you. We all did. We heard you calling down to Petra as she hung behind the ship, trapped. I heard you telling her what she had to do. You convinced her. You saved her life, James."

"But how, Dad?" James asked, almost pleading. "How did she do it? How did she break the ropes with just her mind? It was her yesterday morning too! She's the one that fixed the harness chain beneath the boat. She didn't use her wand! She doesn't..." James stopped himself, realizing he was close to breaking his promise to Petra. He'd vowed not to tell anyone her secret. "She doesn't... use a wand. Anymore. I mean, not that I've seen."

"So I have noticed," Harry replied evenly. "Merlin knows. He's told me a bit, but not very much. He is a man who keeps his own counsel."

"Can you tell me anything?"

Harry shook his head. "Not because you don't deserve to know, James, but because it wouldn't make any sense. Later, perhaps. When things are clearer."

"That's why Merlin's on this trip, then, isn't it?" James said, peering up into his father's face. "The real reason he came is to keep an eye on Petra. Isn't it?"

Harry met his son's gaze. He shook his head very faintly. "You have the mind of an Auror, James," he said seriously. "Use it well. Use it to keep yourself out of trouble. I know how hard it is to hear this, but hear it anyway: for now, there is nothing more you can do for Petra than be her friend. Whatever happens, that will be the thing she needs most."

"What's going to happen?" James asked, not breaking his father's gaze. "What do you know?"

"I know that you have difficulty understanding that the weight of the world isn't yours to bear," Harry said, with fond weariness. He smiled crookedly. "But you come by it honestly, so I can't blame you for it."

For a long moment, the two were silent again. James turned and looked back out at the ocean, listened to the monotonous thrash of the waves beneath the prow. After another minute, he spoke again.

"What happened back there, Dad?"

Harry seemed to know what his son was asking about. He thought about it for a moment, and then took off his glasses. "Did I ever tell you what happened on the day my mother and father were killed?" he asked mildly.

James glanced at him seriously. "Yeah," he said slowly. "I mean, everybody knows about that. There've been books. Movies even."

Harry nodded shortly. "Yes, but that's not what really happened. It's all just guesses, really. I mean, everyone that was there that night is dead now. Except for myself, of course. And I don't remember any of it, fortunately. There's only one person who really did know the truth of that night. You know who that is?"

James frowned as he thought about it. An idea occurred to him. "Dumbledore? Your old Headmaster?"

"Got it in one," Harry said, smiling. It was a thin smile, rather sad. "Albus Dumbledore. He told me about it, although I didn't fully understand it at the time. Maybe no one but Dumbledore himself truly could. It was old magic, after all. Old and deep. Such things aren't taught in books and classes. They come only through wisdom. Dumbledore may not have been perfect... but he was wise."

James blinked, unsure where this was going. "So what did he tell you?" he asked. "What really happened that night?"

Harry narrowed his eyes as he looked out at the waves. "My mother made a trade," he said slowly. "It sounds simple, really, and yet I think it's anything but that. I think the simple explanation is the only way we can really understand it. She made a trade. She gave her life in order to save me. When she did that, she created a kind of magic that Voldemort, in all his cruel power, could never grasp. She created a sort of contract, something that bound him, and hobbled him, something that connected him and me forever, until one of us was dead. The secret of it, the mystery of it, is in the substance of that bond, the force that made the contract unbreakable. Dumbledore told me when I was just a boy, younger than you, but it was too simple for me then. I thought he was just being sentimental. Now, I know different. Now, I know that the force he spoke of truly is the most powerful, the most inviolate and unbreakable thing in the entire universe. Tell me that you know what I am talking about."

James did know what his father was talking about. "Love," he answered. "Your mother's magical contract was bound in love. Somehow. Right?"

Harry nodded again, very slowly this time. "People think love is something all light and fluffy, something dreamy. They write it in flowery pink letters, print it on cards, play wispy songs about it on flutes and harps. But that's not what love really is, or, at least, that's not *all* love is. Love is like chains of unbreakable steel. Love is like iron weights, heavier than the world. Love can crush just as surely as it can lift up. Everything else wilts before it. That's what Voldemort failed to grasp, and what killed him in the end: my mother's love, the trade she made, giving herself... for me."

James had never heard his father talk about such things before. The story of his parents' death was so common, so familiar to everyone in the wizarding world, that it had become almost sterile. Now, James realized, more than he ever had before, that this was something that had actually happened. His dad, the great Harry Potter, had once been a baby, defenseless and helpless, and he had required the protection of his own mother, a woman who had given the last thing, the most powerful thing, she'd known how to give: her own life, as an act of perfect love.

Next to James, his father stirred. "Like I said, it is old magic. So basic, so simple, that there is no word for it. It just is. The trade, the saving of one life by the sacrifice of another. It makes a bond, one that is unbreakable, one that forms a contract forever, just like the one that existed between me and Voldemort, the one that eventually killed him. Do you understand, James?"

James nodded. "Yeah. I mean... I guess so. But what's this have to do with—"

"James," Harry interrupted him, "tonight, something like that happened here, on this very ship. But different. I didn't know for sure, not when it happened. I couldn't see it because Merlin clouded the windows. But I sensed it. Some part of me... some buried, essential part of me... remembered the feeling of it. James, can you tell me... when Petra fell... did you see something? Something unusual?"

James felt cold to his toes. He looked at his father, his eyes wide, stunned. He didn't need to respond. Harry saw it in his son's eyes.

"Something happened between you and Petra. But it wasn't a trade. I don't know how, but you saved her, just like my mother saved me... but you did it without having to die yourself. You were willing to, though. Weren't you?"

James still stared up at his father, unseeing now as he thought back to the events of the night. He nodded.

Harry nodded as well. "I know. You were willing to die in her stead. And somehow that triggered the magic, caused that bond to happen, even though... you *didn't* have to die."

When James spoke, it was in a near whisper. "But... how is that possible? Your mum was a grown witch, and by all accounts, she was excellent. How could I perform a spell as serious and powerful as what she did?"

Harry shook his head. "It isn't that kind of magic, James. That's why Voldemort failed in the face of it. It isn't magic you learn. It isn't like transfiguration or flying a broom. For those who

know love, it's just there, deep down, like an underground river, hidden and powerful. Very few witches and wizards ever have the need, or the depth of character, to call on it. You did, James. Just like my mother. You did."

"But... why did I live, then? If it's a trade...?"

Harry laid a hand on his son's shoulder. "I don't know. It's almost as if you tapped into some completely different form of magic, something beyond what we know or understand. All I know is that it happened, and... I'm proud of you, James. I can't tell you how proud I am, not just because of what you did, but because of how calm and sure you were when you did it." He sighed deeply, and then went on in a lower voice. "Neither can I tell you how relieved I was to see you and Petra come down those stairs together, wet and shaken as you were. Because for one horrid moment, I thought you were no more. I don't ever want to feel that way again. I don't think I could bear it."

James nodded. He understood very well what his father was talking about.

There didn't seem to be anything further to say. Harry put his arm around his son's shoulders and together they began to make their way to the stairs, heading back below-decks.

"Dad," James said as they moved through the darkness, "why did Merlin cover the windows? Why didn't he just use his powers to save Petra?"

Harry was silent for a long moment. James had begun to think his father wasn't going to answer at all, when he finally drew a deep breath.

"Merlinus is a mysterious and powerful wizard, James," he said carefully. "He comes from a dramatically different time. I don't understand why he does a lot of what he does. But he is very like my old Headmaster, Dumbledore, in one important way: he is wise. Wisdom does not come easily or cheaply, and it is to be respected wherever it can be found. I don't always understand Merlinus. But I respect him. He has his reasons, but they are his alone."

James was insistent. He stopped at the top of the deck stairs and turned to face his father. "Guess, Dad. Come on. You're smart. Take a guess."

Harry shook his head slowly, not in negation, but in deep thought. He looked out over the waves. "Merlin either knew that you were going to rescue Petra... or that Petra was going to be saved somehow, one way or another..." he said slowly, and then paused. Finally, he shrugged, still not meeting James' gaze. "Or, for whatever reason—and despite the fact that I hate to consider it—perhaps Merlin was willing... to allow Petra to die."

James felt a chill again. It coursed down his back, prickling his hair.

Harry saw the look on his son's face but didn't try to deny his words, nor did he add anything else to his statement. Finally, after a long thoughtful moment, the two of them descended into the warmth and light of the corridor. They said goodnight at James' door, and he climbed quietly into his bunk.

In the rocking darkness, James lifted his right hand and looked at it. The glowing silver thread was no longer visible, but he had a strong feeling that it was still there, just as real and strong as it had been earlier that night, when it had been the only thing between Petra and the rushing

waves. James had been willing to die for Petra. He hadn't known it at the time, had not consciously thought about it, but there was no doubt about it. He had been willing to trade his life for hers.

Merlin, on the other hand, might well have been willing to allow Petra to die. Incredible as it seemed, he might not have raised a single magical finger to save her. James shook his head slowly on his pillow, letting his hand thump to the bed next to him. He trusted Merlin. His experiences last year had cemented his belief in the old man's wisdom and good intent, just as James' dad had said, but what could possibly explain the fact that Merlin might have chosen not to save Petra? Suddenly, James' heart dropped and his eyes widened. What if Merlin himself had conjured the storm? Nature was his medium, after all, and the source of his powers. What if the storm really had been of magical origin, and Petra's death had been its intent?

It was completely ridiculous, of course. Merlin could be trusted. James knew that now, fully and deeply. Merlin was a good guy.

But what about Petra, James asked himself, unable to silence the voice of his deepest, most honest heart. *After all, Petra believes that she has killed. If she did, maybe Phyllis deserved it, but then again, maybe she didn't. Maybe Albus is right. Maybe the only reason Petra isn't in Azkaban is because nobody can prove what she did. Maybe Merlin was willing to let Petra die tonight because... Petra isn't good. Maybe she's bad. Worse, maybe she's bad... and powerful.*

James stopped his thoughts before they could go any further. Petra *wasn't* bad. She might be confused, and she was certainly sick in some way, but deep down she was good. He knew it. If Merlin thought otherwise—and James couldn't really know if he did, despite how things might have appeared earlier that night—then he was simply wrong.

Thinking that, James finally drifted into a fitful, restless sleep.



The next day, after breakfast, Barstow reined Henrietta in, halting the *Gwyndemere* on the rocking waves. With Dodongo's help, the crew heaved swordfish carcasses overboard, and James, Ralph, and Lucy watched as Henrietta caught them in her jaws, crunching them up whole.

"Was it like the glowing rope you saw last year?" Ralph asked quietly. "In the cave, when we went to get Merlin's cache?"

James shook his head. “No. That started out as a sunbeam, and then turned into a plain old rope, made out of some kind of gold stuff. This was like... like a thread spun out of moonlight.”

Ralph frowned. “What do you think, Lu?”

“I think Uncle Harry was right about what he told James. It’s old magic. Not everybody can tap into it. And when they do, it’s not like something you can control. It’d be like trying to bottle a lightning bolt.”

“What about Petra, though?” James said, glancing between the two of them. “She does magic without a wand! Is that... normal?”

“It isn’t *normal*, of course,” Lucy replied. “But it isn’t completely unheard of. Lots of people practice wandless magic, as a sort of hobby. It’s just very hard to manage. The wand focuses magic, like a magnifying glass can focus a sunbeam and turn it into a torch. Maybe Petra’s just especially talented.”

Ralph looked around to make sure no one was nearby, and then said in a low voice, “I’m more worried about the bit where she told you someone or *something* was following her around. I mean, is she just being paranoid? Or is there really somebody after her? And maybe the rest of us too?”

“If it really was someone evil,” Lucy mused, “then Merlin would have felt it. He’s dead powerful that way. Still, there *was* that scary moment when the pirate ships nearly captured us all. Maybe that’s what she was thinking of.”

Both Ralph and Lucy looked at James, but he merely shrugged and shook his head.

Shortly, Barstow ordered the hatches closed again in preparation for the last leg of the ocean journey. “That’s my girl, Henrietta,” he called down affectionately. “Just a wee bit further, then Dodongo will put in his little bit and give you a well-deserved break.”

Henrietta frolicked in the water, swimming in massive circles and figures of eight, her humps slicing through the waves. She thrashed her tail and flung seawater from her great, scaly head. Finally, Barstow climbed into the brass chair, whistling.

“Want to man the reins one more time, James?” he called down, grinning. “Last chance before landfall!”

James shook his head, but couldn’t help smiling. “No thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” Barstow said, shrugging. He called a short incantation and the magical fishing line pulsed once. Henrietta lunged forward and the boat lurched behind her, rising onto the waves.

As the journey neared its end, James found that the thrill of it had finally worn off. He was eager to reach land again and found himself lurking around the bow as the day progressed, watching the horizon for any sign of their destination. Ralph accompanied him sometimes, as did Albus and Lucy. After lunch, Petra joined him, leading Izzy at her side. The three sat cross-legged on the deck, leaning against the railing, talking idly about what the United States might be like. Interestingly,

Petra seemed to be feeling rather better, to the point where she almost seemed like her old self. She laughed as they spoke, and James was glad to hear it. He wanted to ask her about the magic, about how she did it without her wand, but he didn't. Later, he would, but not now. The timing just wasn't right.

Finally, as the sun began its descent back toward the horizon, James heard a babble of voices and looked up. Persephone Remora and her gaggle of fellow travelers were climbing onto the bow, squinting in the sunlight, their faces pale as gravestones.

"Yes, my friends, I believe you are correct," Remora announced, lifting her face to the breeze. "I can smell it as well. The dark purple scent of lifeblood is thick on the wind. We are very nearly home."

James sighed and rolled his eyes. He stood and threaded through the black-clothed figures, heading below-decks. He sensed the teenagers looking at him as he passed, their faces sly and sarcastic.

Later, James, along with his fellow travelers, climbed a circular stairway to the top of the deckhouse, eager to catch their first glimpse of the United States. James elbowed in between Albus and Lucy at the railing, watching as an irregular dark shape grew on the horizon. Below, the bow looked very small and narrow. James could clearly see Henrietta carving the waves up ahead, her long lithe body rippling just under the rushing surface.

"Are you excited?" Lucy asked, leaning eagerly over the railing, her dark eyes sparkling. "I sure am. I can't wait to get there."

"Why are you so hopped up about it, Lu?" Albus asked. "You've traveled all over the world."

"Sure," Lucy answered, shrugging, "but that was the world. This is the United States. For better or worse, there's no other place quite like it."

Albus scoffed darkly. "The same thing can be said about James' clothes hamper."

"Look," Molly cried suddenly, pointing. "Over there, just to the left of the bow. See? Buildings! That's the skyline! We're nearly there!"

James looked. He wasn't sure he was seeing the same thing Molly was seeing, but it was exciting nonetheless. The great landmass grew and spread, slowly expanding to fill the entire western horizon. As the fog of distance dissipated, James began to recognize the shapes of a great city. Buildings towered up toward the sky, clumped together like stacks of gigantic toy blocks. Finally, as they got close enough for James to make out the faces of individual skyscrapers and to recognize the shapes of other ships clustered around the sprawling ports, Barstow halted the *Gwynodemere*. Deftly, he used his own wand to release Henrietta from her harness chain. A few quick commands and words of praise sent the great sea serpent curling down under the boat, where she would apparently hide for the landward side of the journey. Much more slowly, then, the *Gwynodemere* began to creep forward, propelled by Dodongo's dutiful pedaling below-decks. James turned and saw the smokestack behind him issuing a stream of black smoke: the giant ape's last huge cigar, of course. He grinned, and then turned back to the approaching land.

"The Statue of Liberty," Harry announced from behind James. James saw it, standing tall and straight before the massive city, faint in the misty distance. The statue seemed to regard them mildly, her torch raised high overhead, glinting gold as the sun shone on it. Behind James, his father sighed and said, rather more quietly. "The United States. What would Severus Snape say, I wonder."

"He'd say to keep one hand on your wand and the other on your wallet," Albus said, grinning crookedly.

"We're nearly to port," Percy announced briskly, clapping his hands together. "I suggest we all head below and make ourselves ready. The journey isn't over yet! We've still a way to go before nightfall, and our escorts will be meeting us at customs."

James turned aside, peering around Ralph toward his cousin Lucy. "Is your dad always this chipper when he's traveling?"

Lucy nodded somberly. "He thrives on it. The good part is that we can always leave him to manage all the business of it and just enjoy the sights ourselves. Should be interesting."

"Famous last words," Albus said, narrowing his eyes.

Slowly, James and his family and friends began to thread back down the spiral stairway. By the time they had lugged their trunks back onto the main deck, they were very nearly at port. The shadows of the skyscrapers fell over the *Gwyndemere* as she angled into a narrow inlet, surrounded by massive cargo ships and rusty tugboats. Gulls soared and lofted on the air currents, calling derisively over the waves. The air was thick with the mingled smells of dead fish, seaweed, and, unfortunately, garbage. James turned to watch as a huge barge of rubbish lumbered past them, piled high and surrounded by its own cloud of screeching gulls.

"I hope this isn't a sign of things to come," Ralph said, staring up at the stinking piles of trash.

"Buck up, Ralph," Petra said, coming up behind them and smiling. "A city that can afford to throw that much rubbish away must be a city worth seeing, right?"

Ralph shook his head uncertainly. "If you say so."

"I do," Petra said, and something in her voice made James turn around. To his eyes, Petra certainly didn't appear sick anymore, and the sight made his heart rejoice. She drew in a great, contented breath and let it out slowly, looking up at the towering, glittering buildings. "New York," she said on the exhale, narrowing her eyes slightly. "You know what they call it, don't you?"

James shook his head, smiling at her with bemusement.

"They call it The City that Never Sleeps," she answered herself, nodding with approval. "I like that. I like it very much."

James couldn't stop looking at her. To him, she was very nearly radiant. Beyond her, the buildings loomed and glimmered, casting their shadows over her, sparkling in the setting sun.

Somewhere nearby, a tugboat sounded its horn. James barely heard it.



The next half hour went past in a blur of bustling crowds, echoing announcements, long queues, and flashing signs. James drifted through it all in a sort of dazed wonder, glad that his dad and Uncle Percy seemed to be managing the various questions, connections, and directions. The American wizarding customs agent didn't even look up as James moved in front of the high counter, following Lucy and Izzy.

"Name," the man said, holding out his hand, palm up. James had been watching, so he knew what to do. He dropped his wand into the man's hand.

"James Sirius Potter," he called through the noise of the crowd.

"Reason for visiting the United States?" the agent asked in a bored monotone.

"I'm here with my dad, Harry Potter," James answered. He was satisfied to see the agent blink and look up at him over his glasses. It was a brief look, but James knew what it meant. Even here, Harry Potter was a well-known figure.

"Are you transporting any fruit, vegetables, potions, beasts, insects, cursed objects, or forbidden artifacts into the United States?"

"No," James said, and then added, "er, I have an owl. Nobby. Does he count?"

"Service animals are permitted, so long as they can pass a routine health inspection," the agent said, holding James' wand under a large magnifying glass. Smoky shapes on the glass resolved into letters, and James craned to read them. He was interested to see that the letters spelled out the last several spells he had performed—mostly levitations, but also the hiding spells he had used on Petra's letter—as well as the construction and core details of his wand. The agent quickly jotted James' name on a much-used chalkboard and the letters appeared a moment later on the magnifying glass, beneath the information about his wand. The agent turned and handed the wand back to James over the counter.

"Are you a registered or undocumented werewolf, Animagus, Metamorphmagus, vampire, shape-shifter, or beast-whisperer?" he said, rattling off the words as if he had asked the same question a million times before, which he probably had.

James tried to replay the question in his head. "Er, I don't think so," he answered.

"Welcome to the United States," the agent said, unsmiling. "And good luck, Mr. Potter."

"Er, thanks." James replied. As he moved forward in line, making room for Ralph to hand over his own unusually large wand, James turned and saw his father at an adjacent queue, behind Merlin and in front of his mum. They were all talking, their heads close together.

Finally, the signs and queues opened up into a broad lobby with high vaulted ceilings and moving advertisements framed on the walls. Witches and wizards crowded the space, some flying overhead on brooms, zooming in and out through a bank of very tall doorways set into the far wall. As James peered around at the milling crowd, he was not exactly surprised to see a wide variety of ethnicities, clothing styles, and even animals, all milling through the gigantic space like ants.

On the other side of the space, near the doors, a Bigfoot wearing a backpack and a pair of dark sunglasses lumbered along, towering over those around him. Nearby, a dark-skinned wizard in a red fez stooped over an open carpet bag. He produced a length of white rope, which he deftly tossed into the air, where it caught and hung on nothing. Without pausing, the man closed his carpet bag, scooped it onto his shoulder, and, to James' complete amazement, began to climb the rope. As he reached the top, he vanished into thin air, taking his carpet bag with him. A moment later, the rope zipped upwards, disappearing as well.

"Wicked..." Ralph said appreciatively, standing next to James, his eyes wide.

James nodded and felt excitement bubbling up in him. Together, they followed Percy and Neville Longbottom toward a bank of grand marble stairs and the doors beyond.

"Hey," Ralph said suddenly, pushing himself up on his toes to peer over the crowd, "isn't that Chancellor Franklyn over there? On the landing over to the right?"

James peered around Neville's shoulder and grinned. "It is! And look who's with him!"

"James!" a voice cried out over the noise of the throng. "Ralph! Hey, over here!"

James and Ralph pushed through the crowd, laughing with delight. James leapt up the stairs, taking them two at a time to the nearest landing, where a small group of people stood watching. "Zane!" he called. "I didn't know you were coming!"

"Are you kidding?" Zane said, matching James' grin. "I was planning to stow away in the baggage compartment if Chancellor Franklyn wasn't going to let me come. How are you doing, you guys? Good to see you!"

James reached to shake Zane's hand, but Zane grabbed James around the shoulder and pulled him into a rough half-embrace.

"Oof," James said, laughing. "I forget how touchy-feely you lot are. We're good. Glad to finally be here."

"Hey Zane!" Ralph smiled, huffing up the last of the stairs to the landing. "Nice country you got here."

"You just wait," Zane said, approaching Ralph and throwing an arm around the bigger boy's shoulders. "I'm going to show you all around. You'll love it. But first, intros..." He turned aside,

gesturing toward the people standing nearby. “That’s Chancellor Franklyn, of course, who you already know.”

Franklyn nodded at James and Ralph. “Boys,” he said, smiling. “It’s good to see you both again, and rather grown-up, I daresay. I trust you’ve been practicing up on your defensive techniques. It looks like I may be overseeing your education again this year, if I am not mistaken.”

James nodded, but Zane went on, interrupting him before he could reply. “Next to him, that’s Professor Georgia Burke. She teaches Mug-Occ and Magizoology. You might have her this year if you’re lucky. She lets us pet the tufted rattlebacks, even though it’s technically a violation of the health code. The rest of these mugs are just T.A.s and admin, here to take a few pictures of the big city. Like me,” Zane finished, grinning. “Which reminds me, here, what’s your name?”

Lucy blinked at Zane as she reached the landing. “I’m Lucy Weasley,” she replied. “Who are you?”

“Pleased to meet you, Lucy. I’m Zane. You know these two? Troublemakers, aren’t they? Here, would you mind taking a picture of the three of us?”

James stifled a grin as Zane shoved a large camera into Lucy’s hands.

“Just push the red button on the top right,” he said, backing away and throwing an arm each around James and Ralph. “But you have to hold it down for a second so the flash will work.”

“I know how to operate a camera,” Lucy commented, rolling her eyes. She raised the camera and peered through the viewfinder.

“Say ‘cheese’!” Zane announced, showing all his teeth to the camera.

The camera flashed as Ralph and James both said ‘cheese’.

“Speaking of which,” Albus said, climbing the stairs next to his parents, “here’s our cheesy American friend.”

“Good to see you, Zane” Harry said, patting Zane roughly on the shoulder. “Still tearing it up on the Quidditch pitch?”

“I wish,” Zane replied, shaking his head. “These guys don’t have any respect for the game over here. Here, it’s all Quodpot and Clutch. We have a team, but it’s nothing like when I played with the Ravenclaws.” He sighed, and then brightened. “Hi Petra! I didn’t know you were coming.”

Petra beamed at Zane, walking with Izzy at her side. “I don’t think anybody knew for sure until we were underway,” she answered, shrugging.

“Harry,” Benjamin Franklyn said warmly, reaching to shake hands. “So good to see you again. I only wish it were under better circumstances. And this must be the lovely Ginevra?”

“Pleased to meet you, Chancellor,” James’ mum said, smiling.

“Do call me Benjamin,” Franklyn said, showing her his most charming smile.

"Chancellor," Percy said, sidling between them and reaching for Franklyn's hand. "A pleasure, as always. You've met my wife, Audrey, of course. And this is Denniston Dolohov, Neville Longbottom, and finally, last but not least..."

"Merlinus Ambrosius," Franklyn interjected, looking up at the tall wizard. "Yes, of course. We barely had the chance to speak when last we met. Things were rather hectic, of course. I look forward to a more relaxed interview this time, although I am certain it won't be as long as I might hope."

"Chancellor," Merlin nodded in greeting. "I assure you, this will likely be the first of many visits. I wish to know much about this country of yours. But we will make the best use of what time we have."

Greetings and introductions continued all around, but James grew bored with them and stopped paying attention. Finally, Neville spoke up.

"Begging everyone's pardon, but I, for one, am anxious to reach our final destination. Might we continue our conversation as we move on?"

"Certainly, Mr. Longbottom," Franklyn agreed. "We are only awaiting one more person. Well, in a manner of speaking."

Harry looked around at everyone in his troop. "I believe we are all present and accounted for, Chancellor. Are you quite sure?"

"Indeed I am," Franklyn nodded. "Pardon the confusion. She is one of our own, in fact. Just now returning, by happenstance, from a summer trip abroad with some of her students."

"Here she comes now," Zane said, sighing in annoyance. "Don't tell me you guys had to travel with *her*."

James turned, frowning quizzically, just in time to see Persephone Remora climbing the steps to the landing, her long black cloak flowing dramatically around her, creating a wake through the moving crowd.

"Ah," she sighed. "Returned so soon. It seems as if we barely just left. Greetings, Chancellor, Georgia. Forgive me if we seem less than enthused to see you. It is always rather a strain to come back from our land of origin. Pray, don't take it personally."

"Welcome home, Professor Remora," Franklyn announced. "No offense taken whatsoever. We, too, know what it is like to be away from our homeland. As do our European friends here. I take it most of you have already met?"

"*Professor* Remora?" James said incredulously, turning back to Zane and Ralph.

"Yeah," Zane said under his breath. "Forbidden Practices and Cursology. Don't get me started. She's a real treat."

"Huh," Ralph said, peering aside at the woman and her pasty-faced students. "I wouldn't have guessed that."

James shook his head. “He’s being sarcastic, Ralph. It’s an American thing. Remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Ralph said, nodding. “That makes more sense, then.”

“Friends,” Franklyn announced, gesturing toward the bank of doors behind him, “let us be off!”

Slowly, the group made its way up the last flight of stairs, moving into the sunset light of the doors. James craned to see around Neville Longbottom, eager for his first glimpse of the city beyond.

“I was speechless when I first saw this place,” Zane enthused happily. “I mean, as a wizard, of course. I’d been to New York loads of times before, when I was growing up, but I never knew it had a magical twin. Still, I think I always sort of expected it, you know?”

“What do you mean ‘a magical twin?’” Ralph asked, glancing aside as they neared the doors.

Zane blinked aside at him. “You don’t know already?”

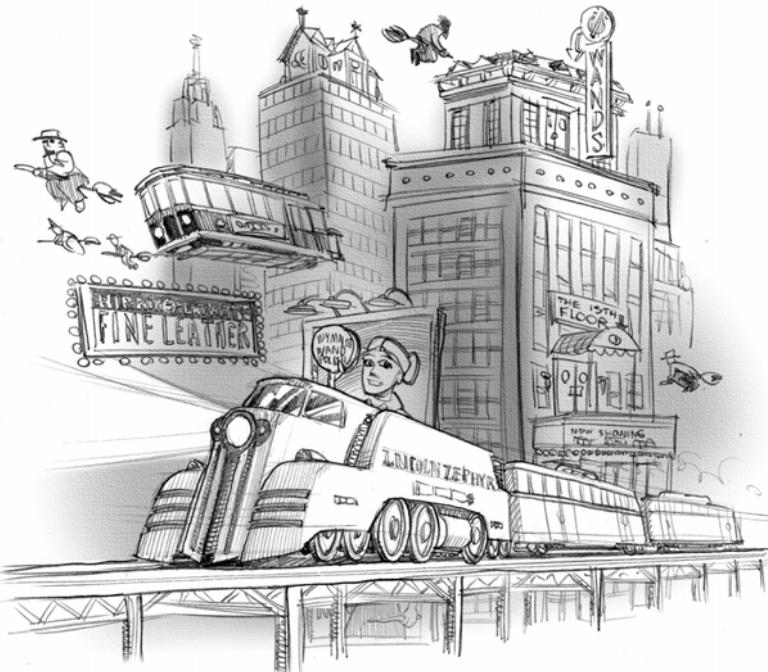
“My dad visited Alma Aleron last summer,” Ralph replied, “but he came via Portkey. I don’t think he made it to New York at all.”

“Oh man,” Zane said, shaking his head and grinning. “Hold onto your wands, then, guys. This is gonna blow your minds.”

The view finally opened before them as James, Zane, and Ralph stepped out into the lowering sunlight. Before them, a paved thoroughfare led through an ornate arched gate. Wrought-iron letters crafted into the arch spelled out the words *‘e magicus pluribus unum’*. Beyond the gate, looming high into the sunset, James was not surprised to see the shapes of glittering skyscrapers and steel towers. What did surprise him, however, so much so that he stopped in his tracks, his mouth dropping open, was the swarm of flying vehicles, broomed witches and wizards, and glowing magical signs and moving billboards that overlaid the buildings, reaching high up into their narrow, urban canyons.

For the first time, James noticed that nearly every skyscraper was topped with another building, smaller and older, as if a much more antiquated city had been pushed upwards by the newer buildings, like birds’ nests in trees. Witches and wizards circled these buildings, perching on elaborate wooden scaffoldings that extended from, and even connected, most of the skyscrapers. In the center of it all, dominating the entire skyline, was a building so bright and transparent that it appeared to be constructed entirely of glass. As James watched, he could see people moving about inside it, riding in shimmering elevators or working over tiny semi-transparent desks.

“Welcome, friends,” Franklyn said, looking up and smiling proudly. “Welcome... to New Amsterdam.”



6. UNDER THE WARPING WILLOW

As it turned out, the group was traveling the rest of the way to Alma Aleron via train. Franklyn led everyone underground through a Muggle subway entrance. Near the turnstiles, James saw Muggle New Yorkers mingling freely and apparently obliviously with witches and wizards in all manner of robes and costumes. A very tall black wizard wearing white robes walked regally with a Bengal tiger at his side, led by a length of gold chain. A small child in a stroller blinked at the tiger and pointed.

"Mom! Tiger!" the boy cried out, grinning with delight.

The mother, a harried-looking woman in a business suit, was talking on her cell phone. The boy called again, and she finally glanced down at him, patting him on the head. "That's nice, honey," she said. "Mommy loves your imagination. Tigers in the subway. You should draw that when we get home."

James craned to watch as Franklyn led the troop though a special turnstile set into a tiled wall. "She doesn't even see the tiger," he said to Ralph, pointing. "It's right there in front of her! It almost stepped on her foot!"

"The kid sees it, though," Ralph commented.

"See what I mean?" Zane said, stepping through the turnstile. "The spell only really starts working when you're about three years old. That's why, when I was a kid, I always sort of knew there was something magical about this town, even though I didn't really remember the details."

James opened his mouth to ask another question, but at that moment he caught his first glimpse of the train that they were about to board. It rested between two elevated platforms in its own special terminal. The engine compartment was long and sleek, made from shining steel and glass, so streamlined that it appeared to be moving even as it stood still. Stylized letters along the side announced it as the *Lincoln Zephyr*. Double doors along the train's cars shuttled open and James felt the throng of travelers surge toward them. In the lead, Franklyn and Merlin stepped into the brightly lit interior of the engine's seating compartment.

"Sure beats taking a cab," Zane announced. "The *Zephyr* line is the fastest way around the city. Even faster than a broom, especially at rush hour."

James glanced aside as he approached the open doors. Petra, Izzy, and Lucy were entering a passenger car further down the train, following James' mum and dad and his Aunt Audrey, who was herding Molly and Lily ahead of her. Finally, the noise of the terminal fell away as James passed through the car's doors, finding himself in a richly upholstered and furnished interior. The walls and fixtures gleamed with brushed aluminum and there didn't seem to be a single hard angle in sight.

"Cool," Ralph said, finding a seat in the center of the lead car. "Looks like the entire train grew out of some kind of crazy dream."

"It's called Art Deco," Zane pointed out. "These were designed by some wizard artist named Mucha a long time ago. I learned about him in Magi-American History. Even the Muggles knew about him, although they didn't know he was a wizard, of course."

The train filled quickly and James peered forward, toward the engineer's post under the train's sloping nose. A very thin goblin with a very large bald head stood before the broad windows, which looked out into darkness. A set of gleaming levers were embedded into the train's control panel. The goblin engineer gripped them and then leaned toward a brass tube that extended from above.

"*Lincoln Zephyr*, five-twenty, now departing the terminal," he announced, and his voice echoed along the length of the train. "Proud to be on time for the eight thousand, three hundred and twenty-first departure in a row. Thank you for patronizing the New Amsterdam Mass Transit Railway System."

There was a loud click as the public address system shut off. The goblin engineer leaned forward and pressed both levers up at the same time. Immediately, the train began to glide forward, so smoothly that James could barely tell that they were moving at all except for the sight of the terminal outside the windows, which began to recede past, accelerating swiftly.

"So how is all of this done?" James finally asked, turning back to Zane and Ralph. "I mean, a whole magical city built right into a Muggle city. How's it work?"

Zane shook his head and raised his hands, palms out. "Don't ask me. I tried to get Stonewall to explain it to me one time and I finally had to ask him to stop because my brain was about to explode. Ask Chancellor Franklyn if you want an answer you can wrap your head around."

"What's that, boys?" Franklyn asked from across the aisle. "A question?"

James' face reddened, but Zane prodded him, gesturing at the old rotund wizard across from them.

"We were just wondering, sir," James said, raising his voice over the increasing drone of the train's engines, "how is it that New York and New Amsterdam can exist in the same place, at the same time?"

Franklyn nodded appreciatively. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't ask, Mr. Potter. The wizarding metropolis of New Amsterdam is, as you can imagine, quite old. It began as a mere alley, not unlike your Diagon Alley, hundreds of years ago, back when the Muggle city of New York was, itself, barely a port village on the Hudson River. As both cities grew, it became apparent that the various Disillusionment and Fidelius Charms put in place by the magical community within the city were simply too haphazard to manage such a large-scale secret. Eventually, the New Amsterdam Department of Magical Administration requested assistance from a foreign ally in the guise of a very unique and gifted witch. Agreeing, this foreign ally sent her, and she has resided with us ever since. This witch, you see, is content to perform one single spell, a very specialized bit of magic that requires nearly all of her prodigious attention—that of casting the most powerful and complete Disillusionment Charm in the entire world."

Ralph let out a low whistle, impressed. "Wow. So she's been here for a long time? How old is she, then?"

"Old," Franklyn laughed, "although not quite as old as I."

"So why does she need to stay here?" James asked. "Why couldn't she just cast the spell and go back home, to wherever she came from?"

Franklyn took off his square spectacles and wiped them on his lapel. "It is complicated, I admit. Some spells need only be cast once, of course, and their effect is satisfied... others..."

"Others require constant support," Merlin added from the seat next to Franklyn. "They dissipate over time. Some have lives of hundreds or thousands of years. Others, however, evaporate nearly instantly. I suspect that such might be the case with a spell as powerful and pervasive as the one which hides this wizard city from the Muggle city that lies beneath it."

"Indeed, and well put," Franklyn agreed. "Thus, our friendly witch remains with us, performing her solitary duty, even as she sleeps."

"Sounds like a rum job if you ask me," Ralph said, shaking his head. "I sure wouldn't want to do it."

"Where does she live?" James interjected, leaning forward. "Have you ever met her?"

"I have spoken to her many times," Franklyn said carefully. "Although, alas, I myself have never heard her voice. Few have. Frankly, I am not sure she speaks English, and my foreign languages are rather woefully rusty these days."

Suddenly, the train shot out of darkness and into the light of the lowering sun. James turned in his seat and squinted out the window.

"Wow," he said, pressing his hands to the glass. "How fast are we going anyway?"

Zane leaned over James' shoulder and shook his head. "Who knows? Fast. I don't think the *Zephyr* even has a speedometer. No point, really."

Outside, the great blocks and towers of the buildings rolled past the windows with shocking speed. Rivers of yellow taxis and silver buses clogged the Muggle streets while the air above was crowded with streams of witches and wizards on brooms as well as flying trolleys and buses and even the occasional sphinx and hippogriff. The wizarding metropolis of New Amsterdam seemed to occupy many of the second floors of Muggle New York City, with grand entryways that opened atop Muggle theater marquis and awnings. Magical signs and billboards flickered past, announcing all manner of wizard products, businesses, and entertainments, not all of it quite fit for young eyes.

"So does most of New Amsterdam sit up on top of the buildings of New York?" Ralph asked a little breathlessly.

"Yeah, most of it," Zane said. "But there are wizard stores, offices, and secret entrances all over the place. Almost every building in New York has a wizard space in it on the thirteenth floor. Muggle elevators just skip right over it because they're superstitious about the number thirteen. Convenient, eh?"

"What about that skyscraper over there?" James asked, pointing. "The huge one that looks like it's made out of glass. Don't tell me *that's* a Muggle building!"

"*That*," Zane said proudly, "is the center of the American wizarding world. It's the headquarters of the Department of Magical Administration, the Worldwide Wizard's Alliance, and the International Magical Bank. People just call it the Crystal Mountain."

"Oh!" Ralph said, smacking his forehead. "I've heard of that! That's excellent! But how do Muggles not see *that*?"

Zane shrugged. "Same way they don't see the rest. To them, it's just a three-story parking garage that's always full. It's the sort of thing they expect to see on nearly every corner anyway."

James glanced back at him, unsure if his American friend was joking or not. Zane shrugged and smiled.

A loud click sounded throughout the train as the public address system turned on again. "Attention passengers," the goblin engineer said in a businesslike voice. "Please secure all loose objects and find a handhold. Remember, the M.T.R.S. is not responsible for lost or damaged goods during Muggle railway interactions. Thank you."

"What's that mean?" James said, peering forward. The *Zephyr* was currently rocketing along an elevated section of track that curved around a bank of industrial buildings. "What are 'Muggle railway interactions'?"

"Oh, this is the best part," Zane said, climbing to his feet. "Come on with me. Grab onto the ceiling handles here along the middle aisle."

"What?" Ralph said suspiciously, but standing nonetheless. "Why?"

"The *Zephyr* uses most of the same tracks as the Muggle subway," Zane explained, adjusting his stance on the ribbed metal floor. "So, occasionally, the *Zephyr* and the Muggle trains have... er... interactions."

"What sort of interactions?" James asked, frowning and peering ahead as the tracks flickered past, dim in the shadows of the buildings.

Zane thought about it for a moment. "Have you ever seen a square-dance?" he asked, glancing back at James and Ralph.

"Er," Ralph said, perplexed, "no. How does a square dance?"

Zane shook his head and grinned. "It's called a do-si-do. Never mind, Ralphinator. Just hang onto the handle. Keep your other hand in the air when we go over. It's fun!"

"When we go—" James began, but the words choked in his throat as he saw another train come barreling around the track in front of them. He could tell by the blunt nose and spray-painted graffiti of the approaching engine that it was a Muggle subway train. Its headlight shone on the *Zephyr*'s windows. It zoomed toward them, occupying the exact same track.

"Geronimo!" Zane called out, shooting his free hand into the air.

James gasped, certain that they were all about to die, when the engineer of the *Zephyr* suddenly jerked the steering levers, forcing the left one all the way up, yanking the right one down. Instantly, the world turned sickeningly outside the windows of the *Zephyr*. Daylight and shadow switched places as the train spun into the air, following a new set of ghostly, curving tracks. James was immediately disoriented, but remembered not to let go of the ceiling handle. A moment later, there was a massive shudder as the engine landed again, pulling the rest of the passenger cars behind it.

"You really should've warned your friends, Mr. Walker," Franklyn said with some reproach. "And it is unsafe to stand up during an interaction unless there is no other option."

"But it's more *fun* that way," Zane proclaimed, unfazed.

"What just happened to us?" Ralph said, plopping back into his seat. "And why is it so dark outside all of a sudden?"

"You probably don't want to know the answer to that question, Ralph," Zane said sincerely. "Trust me."

James moved to the window and peered out. Sure enough, the sunset sky seemed to be gone, replaced by a blur of blocky, shadowy shapes. Dots of lights flashed by, along with complicated metal struts and girders. He leaned forward and peered down. A moment later, his knees weakened as he saw nothing but empty space below the train. Dim blue space fell away to distant clouds, lit with the waning sun.

"We're upside-down," Zane announced soberly, clapping James on the shoulder. "We're on the underside of the track now, letting the Muggles go by on top. Seems only fair, since they built the tracks in the first place."

"That's..." James said faintly. He glanced ahead, past the *Zephyr*'s front windows, saw that they were, indeed, rocketing along on the underside of the elevated railway. Ghostly tracks glimmered ahead of the *Zephyr*, cast magically by the train itself. "That... is completely excellent!"

"Ralph," Zane said, glancing up at the train's ceiling. "You forgot to secure your stuff, dude."

Ralph peered at Zane, his face pale. "What do you mean? How can you tell?"

"Because," Zane replied, smiling and plopping into the seat next to his friend, "your cauldron cakes are stuck to the ceiling now. Sorry. The magical gravity only works on living things."

James turned and looked up at the sticky buns plastered to the ceiling. He laughed.

Outside, a flash of bright purple light exploded with blinding force, rocking the train so hard that James collapsed onto Ralph. The train jerked violently, slewing back and forth under the elevated tracks and the interior lights flickered wildly. In the rear of the car, a window shattered, spraying glass and letting in a howl of rushing wind. Commuters screamed and covered their heads, jostling away from the blast.

"What's happening?" James yelled, trying to scramble up. "Is this part of the ride?"

Zane shook his head, his eyes wide. "No! That was magic! Somebody attacked us!"

Another bolt of purple light slammed against the side of the train, rocking it over onto its right wheels. A curtain of sparks flew past the windows as the roof screeched against the elevated track's steel supports.

"Hold on!" the engineer shouted. James turned to look and saw him jerk the steering levers again. The train lurched to the right, slamming back down onto the ghostly tracks and spinning up into the dying sunlight. The Muggle subway train was past now, fortunately, allowing the *Zephyr* to thump back down onto the main tracks with a rocking crash. It continued to hurtle forward, careening between buildings and over bridges.

"Who is attacking us?" Merlin asked Benjamin Franklyn, climbing to his feet in the swaying train.

"I—I don't know!" Franklyn stammered, struggling to stay upright in his seat. "I can't see anything!"

James looked up as the big man moved behind the row of seats, pushing through the frightened passengers toward the side of the train that had been battered. James followed Merlin's gimlet gaze. There were three figures flying alongside the train, black against the blurring cityscape. Another purple flash shot from one of the figures, shattering more windows and forcing the train to vibrate on its tracks.

"Mr. Engineer," Merlin commanded loudly, producing his staff. "Now would be a good time for us to take evasive action."

The goblin engineer glanced back at Merlin over his shoulder, his eyes bulging. "What d'ya expect me to do? We're on a train, if ya haven't noticed!"

"A *magical* train," Merlin corrected quickly. "One that can apparently make its own tracks. I'd suggest that you do so, sir. I'll do what I can with our pursuers."

"There're more on this side!" Franklyn cried out, pointing. He fumbled for his own wand as two more blasts erupted, one on each side. The train leapt off the tracks and then crashed down again, screeching horribly. Passengers scrambled over one another, crying out in fear.

"Here goes nothin'!" the engineer called, gripping the steering controls. A moment later, the train leapt off the tracks again, following its own set of ghostly rails. The rails curved sideways and down, leading the train completely off the railway bed.

Merlin used his staff to fire at the dark shapes outside as they angled to follow the train. His bolt struck one of the figures, which jerked and spun away, falling from its broom. The other two figures arced closer, shadowing the train as it hurled through the air.

"I can't hold her up like this!" the engineer yelled, struggling with the levers. "She's too heavy to go unsupported!"

"Then put her down!" Merlin commanded, still firing.

A blast of purple light engulfed the right side of the train, forcing it into a barrel roll just as it began to descend. James gripped his seat as hard as he could while the world rolled over ahead of them. The train righted itself just as it struck the pavement of the busy street below, squeezing between lines of dense traffic.

"We're going to crash!" Ralph yelled. "At the intersection!"

James looked ahead and saw what Ralph meant. A line of buses and cabs was lumbering slowly through the intersection, crossing directly in front of the train.

"Wands!" James shouted, producing his own and pointing it wildly toward the front of the train. "Zane and I will take the cabs! Ralph, you get the bus!"

Ralph's eyes widened, but he didn't argue. The three boys stabbed their wands forward and called the incantation—"Wingardium Leviosa!"—at exactly the same moment. James felt adrenaline surge up his arm, powering the magic, and the first of the cabs lofted immediately into the air, turning sideways. He dropped it a moment later, letting it fall halfway onto a blue police car as he aimed at another cab. Together, he and Zane succeeded in levitating the cabs out of the way. Ralph grunted and his arm trembled as the bus finally shoved forward, its rear end rising and sliding sideways. A moment later, the *Zephyr* rammed through the space, barely missing the disheveled traffic. The three boys fell back into their seats amidst the screams of their fellow passengers.

More bolts of magic fired between the train and the flying figures, and James sensed that his dad and the others were waging their own battle from further back in the train.

"We can't keep this up!" the engineer shouted, gripping the controls and veering the train through the Muggle traffic. "It's not what we're made for! And we're breaking nearly every code of railway conduct in the book!"

James scrambled in his seat, prepared to use his own wand to fight the flying dark figures, when a hand fell onto his shoulder, gently, but with surprising strength.

"Have a seat, James," a female voice said. "Don't you worry."

James craned to look. Behind him, standing calmly amidst the terrified passengers, was the unusual woman he had first met in the halls of Atlantis, the one who had told him he was so like his grandfather, James the First. She smiled down at him.

"Merlinus is doing his best," she said, almost whispering, "but this isn't really his element, you know."

She winked at him, and then stepped lightly over to the window on the opposite side of the train. She raised her hand, wandless, and pointed at one of the dark figures that flew alongside the train. There was a faint, bluish flash and the figure seemed to freeze in the air, so suddenly and completely that its cloak ceased flapping. It dropped to the street like a stone, crashing against the windscreen of a taxi. The other figures fell quickly thereafter, dropping the moment the woman pointed at them, her face mild, almost amused.

"Did you see that?" Zane demanded, gripping James' arm. "Is she with you?"

"I've never seen her before in my life!" Ralph called back. "But I'm glad she's on *our* side!"

James looked aside at Merlin, but the big wizard hadn't noticed. He was busy aiming for the last pursuer on his side of the train. His face was shiny with sweat, pinched in exertion. Whoever the woman was, she certainly appeared to be correct: the city definitely wasn't Merlin's element.

The last cloaked figure swooped upwards over the train and disappeared from view. A moment later, it appeared again, directly in front of the train as it hurtled forward.

"Go home, Harry Potter!" the figure yelled back, its face hidden behind a metallic mask, its voice magically amplified so that it resonated throughout the entire train. "Consider this a warning! Take your people and go home! Go home while the W.U.L.F. is willing to *let* you go!"

Merlin raised his staff to strike once more, but the figure spun on its broom and zoomed away, merging with the throng of broom-borne travelers high over the city's streets.

"Hold onto your hats, ladies and gentlemen!" the goblin engineer cried suddenly. "We've got the eastbound overpass dead ahead and we're *going* for it, ready or not!"

James leaned back into his seat as the engineer hauled backwards on both of his steering levers. The train leapt up from the street, following its ghostly rails once more into the air. It turned as it flew, angling toward another set of elevated tracks as they loomed ahead. The train seemed to falter, pulled down by its own weight and its failing inertia. James was quite certain that they were going to ram directly into the side of the overpass, even saw the shadow of the train fall onto the support girders. At the last possible moment, however, the train seemed to loft upwards. The engine jiggled and snaked through the air, dragging its passenger cars behind it, and finally crashed down onto the tracks.

"Is everyone all right?" Franklyn called faintly, struggling to get up from the floor of the aisle, where he had apparently fallen.

"We're fine, more or less," Zane answered, looking from James to Ralph.

James nodded, and then remembered the woman in the black robe. He glanced around the darkened train as it continued on, rather more slowly, but smoothly once again. She was nowhere to be seen among the frightened passengers. Movement in the very back of the car caught James' eyes, however: a flicker of black fabric and a slowly closing door. It had to be the mysterious woman, but could she really be using the bathroom at a time like this? James moved into the aisle, watching the door as it swung shut.

"Take your seat, Mr. Potter," Merlin said faintly. James looked up and saw the Headmaster clinging grimly to the seats in front of him, still standing, but just barely. His face was solemn, sheened with sweat.

"Are you all right, sir?" James asked, peering closely at the huge man.

"As fine as anyone else, under the circumstances," Merlin replied. "Do sit back down, James."

"In a minute," James said, backing away toward the rear of the car. "I, uh, have to use the loo."

Merlin nodded, not really listening.

When James got to the bathroom door, he found it unlocked, still cracked open. Wind whistled and roared through the broken windows, rocking the door on its hinges. Inside was only darkness.

"Ma'am?" James called, leaning toward the door. "Everything okay in there?"

There was no answer but for a low, steady hiss. Steeling himself, James reached for the bathroom door. He pulled it slowly open.

There was no one inside the tiny room, but the sink was running. James peered closer. For some reason, both the hot and cold handles had been cranked all the way on. He stared at them and the empty room. Where had the woman gone? And who was she anyway?

Darkened and damaged, the *Zephyr* rolled onward through the city.



It had become readily apparent that the *Zephyr* wasn't going to continue the rest of the journey in its current state.

After a few minutes of discussion, Professor Franklyn and Headmaster Merlin had repaired some of the broken windows but were unable to fix most of them since the broken glass that had comprised them had been scattered along a rather surprising length of Lexington Avenue. The engineer himself was adamant that regardless of the operating condition of the *Zephyr*'s engine, any 'non-standard Muggle interaction event' required the stoppage of the train at the nearest terminal or safe place and the alerting of the appropriate authorities. In this case, unfortunately, the 'appropriate authorities' included the New Amsterdam Wizarding Police and representatives from a mysterious agency known as the Magical Integration Bureau.

Shortly, the train had screeched to a halt on a side track next to an abandoned factory. The Hudson River sparkled nearby in the rising moonlight and traffic could be heard thrumming somewhere nearby, but for now, the *Zephyr* rested inconspicuously hidden among banks of brick walls and blind windows. Twin smokestacks jutted up into the indigo sky with nothing but pigeons at their tops. At their base, incongruously, perched a brightly lit wizarding establishment with a candy red pagoda roof and two golden dragon statues flanking the round door. The sign that jutted up from the roof proclaimed the establishment to be 'Chang's Magic Luck Hunan Palace'. A fleet of Chinese wizards in white coats and red pillbox caps came and went from the establishment, carrying large grease-stained paper sacks in special baskets attached to the tips of their brooms.

James watched from where he sat on the end of the *Zephyr* in the shadow of the factory and its perching wizard restaurant. Ralph sat next to James on his right while Lucy sat on his left, watching the Chinese delivery wizards with a mixture of curiosity and disdain.

"It's not true Chinese food, you know," she commented. "Not if you've had the real thing."

"So you keep saying," James said, rolling his eyes.

"An egg roll is an egg roll," Ralph proclaimed, rubbing his stomach. "I wonder when our order will get here. I'm starved."

"Shh!" James hissed, leaning. "I'm trying to listen in on this."

Zane stood some distance away on the side of the railway bed next to Professor Franklyn and the rest of the adults.

"I'm sorry, Professor," one of the wizarding policemen, a thin man named Trumble, was saying, consulting his little notepad. "You mentioned that these men came out of nowhere. They weren't provoked in any way?"

"I assure you," Franklyn answered, puffing out his chest, "we are not in the habit of provoking warfare whilst aboard moving trains. We have women and students aboard the train, as you know, not to mention any number of anonymous fellow travelers. These men attacked us in a coordinated fashion, and with no provocation whatsoever."

"That's not entirely true," Harry Potter said.

"What do you mean?" the larger and older policeman, Dunst, said, his face suspicious.

"The leader announced his affiliation with the W.U.L.F." Harry answered. "I expect it was Edgar Tarrantus himself, by the mask he was wearing. *He* certainly seemed to feel provoked. He threatened me and my people by name, telling us if we didn't leave the United States there would be trouble."

"I'd say there's been trouble already," Neville said, narrowing his eyes. "They weren't out to give warnings tonight. They meant to derail the train, at the very least. Warnings were what they resorted to only when we fought back and showed them a little what-for."

"Ah, that," Trumble said apologetically, sticking his pencil behind his ear. "It was the fighting back that was the problem tonight, when you get right down to it."

"Surely you didn't expect us to stand by and do nothing?" Denniston Dolohov said, raising his voice. James knew that, in fact, Dolohov himself had not fired a single magical shot, being a Squib, but James was impressed with the man's spirit nonetheless. "They were trying to kill us all!"

"That's hardly conclusive," Dunst replied, obviously unconvinced. "Probably just a bunch of local punks out looking for trouble. It was your overreaction that's caused this mess."

"Overreaction!" Franklyn sputtered. "I'll have your badge number! The impertinence!"

James noticed that throughout the conversation, Merlin stood some distance away, his face lowered in shadow, his arms folded.

The goblin engineer perked up then, apparently deciding that now was the time to distance himself from what had happened. "I didn't want to do it, officers," he said. "They *told* me to. It was all that big guy's idea."

"You didn't *have* to do it, you know," Zane said, cocking his head at the goblin. "As I recall it, we all did what we had to do to avoid being turned into highway hash, *you* included. Merlin made a request and you agreed to it."

"Well," the engineer said, scratching at his bald head, "he's Merlin, ain't he? Fellow like that is a hard one to say no to. Even if I didn't know at the time that's who he was."

Another voice spoke and James saw that it belonged to one of the two men from the Magical Integration Bureau. "According to a cursory survey of the scene of the incident, at least seventy-nine non-magical persons witnessed this train being piloted along Lexington Avenue," the man said in a rough, gravelly voice, consulting a clipboard. He had rugged features beneath a pair of dark sunglasses and a very staid black suit and tie. "At least thirty of those non-magical persons witnessed said train flying, either off the 21st Street southbound overpass or back up onto its northbound counterpart, some three blocks away. Initial damage estimates are in the hundreds of thousands, including a New York City police cruiser which somehow managed to end up beneath a Liberty Taxi." The man lowered his clipboard and glanced around at those present. "I can't be one hundred percent certain," he said in a different tone of voice, "but I think this might be the biggest violation of magical integration laws in at least a decade. Wouldn't you agree, Espinosa?" The last question he directed to his counterpart, a younger man with black hair and a pencil goatee.

"I think you're probably right, Price," the thinner man agreed. "At least a decade."

"I'm sure our people are already on the scene, setting things to rights," Franklyn soothed. "We have response teams for just such events, as you know. By morning, no one will remember anything other than that they had a somewhat exciting time during their previous evening's commute. The real question is who these men were and if we need to take their threats seriously."

"I take every threat seriously," Harry announced gravely. Next to him, Neville nodded.

"Does that mean you will be going back home?" Franklyn asked suddenly, peering up at the two men.

"Not at all," Harry replied immediately. "But it does mean we must be exceedingly cautious. I, for one, do not believe that those who attacked us were merely street toughs. They claimed to be members of the W.U.L.F., and were quite possibly attended by that organization's global leader. As one of my former teachers used to say, this will require constant vigilance. Fortunately, we are prepared for just such a thing."

A flicker of shadow appeared overhead followed by the flap of wings. James looked up from where he sat and saw a pigeon circle downwards, landing easily on Trumble's outstretched arm. Dunst quickly removed a rolled note from a tube on the pigeon's leg.

"I like owls better," Lucy commented next to James. "Pigeons are filthy birds."

James shrugged. He didn't have an opinion on that particular subject.

"All right," Dunst announced, reading the note and apparently disliking its contents. "Everything checks out with headquarters downtown. Mr. Potter here, along with his entourage, are indeed here at the request of the D.M.A. My apologies, gentlemen, Professor. Another train has been dispatched to take you and your people the rest of the way to your destination. The remaining passengers will complete their journey via the *Zephyr*, assuming you believe it rail-worthy, Mr. Engineer." He handed the note back to Trumble, who peered down at it.

"Well, I should hope that settles it, then," Franklyn announced huffily.

"I wouldn't be too hasty," the gruff man in the black suit said. "There will be paperwork, I'm afraid. I hate paperwork. It makes me cranky. Mr. Potter, I'd expect a call from the Magical Integration Bureau, if I was you. In fact, I suspect we will take a very close interest in you during the extent of your visit. I hope you'll be willing to cooperate with us."

Harry studied the rough-faced man for a moment, narrowing his eyes. Then, charmingly, he smiled. "It'll be our pleasure, sir. But do let me inquire: what is the basis of your interest in me and my people?"

"You're English, aren't you?" the gruff man, Price, asked, smiling tightly. "You might be interested to know that the tape the F.B.I. received explaining the terms of the release of our kidnapped senator, Charles Filmore, was recorded by someone with a British accent. One can only assume that you are here, officially, to investigate Senator Filmore's ongoing abduction, not to mention the matter of our relocated skyscraper. The newsmen and the general public may buy the

story about little green men from the Andromeda galaxy, but we in the Magical Integration Bureau, well... we tend to be a suspicious bunch.”

Harry nodded. “As would I, let me assure you. I welcome your assistance and collaboration. For now, though, might I ask, just out of curiosity, what the purported terms of Senator Filmore’s release are?”

“That’s confidential, of course,” Price answered apologetically. “Fortunately, the F.B.I. believes the tape is a prank. I myself know very little about it except that the prevailing view around the Bureau is that we do not negotiate with terrorists—alien, British, or otherwise.”

Harry seemed to accept this. “I look forward to hearing from your office, then, Mr. Price. Now if you will excuse us, it is getting rather late and we still have some distance to go if I am not mistaken.”

Price bowed slightly and spread his arms. “*Mi casa es su casa,*” he replied. “Enjoy your travels. And welcome to America.”

“Hey chief,” Trumble said, frowning at the little note in his hands, “it says here we’re supposed to escort Mr. Potter and his group for the rest of the trip. You didn’t read the whole thing.”

“Is that so?” Dunst said with deliberate emphasis. “Well, silly me.”

In the distance, the huff and screech of an approaching train grew. Shortly, a headlight appeared around the bend of the tracks, slowing as it approached.

James sighed and looked up. High overhead, one of the Chinese delivery wizards took off from the wooden platform that surrounded the brightly lit restaurant. He circled economically around the extinct smokestacks, dipped down into the shadow of the factory, and swooped toward the *Zephyr*. A moment later, he hovered in front of James, Ralph, and Lucy, consulting a handwritten bill.

“You order three Happy Emperor Family Combo?” he said, glancing up at the three of them. “You owe me sixty-six seventy-five.”

“Here you go,” Harry said, handing the man a small handful of gold coins. Zane took the paper bag from the basket on the end of the delivery wizard’s broom and peered into it.

“Cool!” he said. “Magic fortune cookies!”

“Where’s my egg roll?” Ralph asked, leaning forward and sniffing at the open bag. Lights flickered within it and James was mildly amused to see lit sparklers inside the bag, stuck into the tops of a variety of white cartons and boxes.

“What this kinda money?” the delivery wizard said, peering suspiciously at the Galleons in his hand. “This not real money. You trick me?”

“It’s real,” Franklyn said wearily. “European Galleons are still legal tender in this country, even though you see fewer and fewer of them these days.”

The Chinese wizard regarded Franklyn doubtfully. A moment later, he pocketed the Galleons. "Fine fine. But no change. Don't know exchange rate."

"Call it a tip," Harry smiled, accepting a paper bag of crab rangoon from Zane.

The Chinese wizard nodded, doffed his red pillbox cap, turned, and swooped away. In the darkness beyond the *Zephyr*, the wizarding policemen, Dunst and Trumble, stepped off the tracks, approaching their black and yellow police brooms. Further away, the agents from the Magical Integration Bureau climbed down the embankment toward a nondescript black car. Ralph's father took the delivery sack from Zane and climbed into the train to distribute it around. Harry and the rest of the adults stepped aside into the weeds that bordered the outside of the tracks as the second train chugged to a stop next to the *Zephyr*.

Ralph munched his egg roll thoughtfully. "If I'm not mistaken," he said, watching the men in the dark suits as they started their car, "those two are Muggles."

"You nailed it, Ralphinator," Zane said, sighing. "The Bureau is part of the Muggle F.B.I., only super top-secret. The president doesn't even find out about them unless he absolutely has to. They're a little creepy and intense, but it's all part of the deal."

"What deal is that?" James asked.

Zane leaned against the end of the *Zephyr* and waved one of the sparklers from the delivery sack. "The government here was a lot more involved with the wizarding world, way back in the day. The Muggle leaders who knew about the magical community were suspicious of them, even though a lot of the witches and wizards were their friends and helpers. Franklyn can explain it better if you want him to, but basically, they built protections into the original laws that governed the coexistence of the magical and Muggle worlds. Those guys in the suits... they're one of those protections."

Lucy frowned at the black car as it drove serenely away, its lights off in the darkness. "Do they have... what's it called... *jurisdiction* over us?"

Zane shrugged slowly and shook his head, as if he wasn't really sure.

"All I know," Ralph commented, climbing to his feet, "is that we were lucky to have that witch in our compartment. The one that pegged all those guys on the brooms. Talk about your wandless magic."

Zane screwed up his face thoughtfully. "Was she part of your group?"

"I met her once before," James admitted. "In the hallway back at the Aquapolis. She's... curious."

Lucy raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean 'curious'?"

James shrugged. "She knew things about me, that's all. She said it was because we Potters are famous."

"I suspect there's more to it than that," Lucy said, still looking closely at James. "Otherwise, you wouldn't call her curious."

Ralph raised his eyebrows. "Well, there was the bit where she performed some dead serious magic without any wand in her hand," he proclaimed. "I mean, first Petra, and now some unknown lady. I'm starting to feel like I'm missing out on a trend."

"Probably you just couldn't see her wand," Lucy said dismissively. "It was dark in there, and there was a lot going on."

"I saw her raise her left hand and point," Zane replied. "There was no wand there, I promise you."

"Yes," Lucy nodded, her face merely inquiring, "but did you see her right hand?"

Zane thought about it, but before he could answer, James spoke up again. "What about when we were about to crash into the overpass? I was sure the train wasn't going to make the jump, but then up we went, like we suddenly sprouted wings. Maybe it was that witch again! Maybe she levitated the train!"

Lucy shook her head. "You can't levitate yourself, James, or anything you happen to be riding in. It'd be like trying to pick yourself up by your own feet. It's one of the laws of magical dynamics."

"Well, *somebody* gave us a boost back there," Ralph said. "I felt it happen."

Lucy opened her mouth to respond, and then stopped. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Wait a minute," Zane said, pointing at Lucy and looking at James. "She's this year's Rose, right? She's the smart one!"

"What, Lucy?" James asked, bumping her.

Lucy shook herself. "Well, like I said, it's impossible, but still..."

Ralph threw up his hands in exasperation. "So tell already!"

"I think it might have been Petra," Lucy said, looking at the three boys.

James felt a shiver coil at the base of his spine. "Why do you say that, Lu?"

Lucy's face was tense as she thought about it. "I was in the same car as Petra. Back in the middle of it all, even when those dark flyers were blasting the engine with their wands, Petra stayed unusually calm. Uncle Harry and Professor Longbottom were firing back at them and there was no end of confusion, what with everyone screaming and the train crashing along the street, but Petra just sat there, holding Izzy's hand. The two of them were just looking out the window, watching everything happen. And then, when the train leapt up, aiming for the tracks, I saw it..."

"Let me guess," James said quietly. "Petra closed her eyes. Like she was concentrating on something."

Lucy looked at James. "No," she replied meaningfully. "They both did. Izzy and Petra both. And that's when it happened. That's when we lifted up onto the tracks. That's when we didn't crash."

There was a long awkward moment of silence as everyone considered this. Finally, James heard the approach of footsteps from the railway bed in front of them.

"James, and the rest of you," Neville called up from the side of the tracks. "The other train is finally ready for us. Go and alert Professor Remora and the others in our group, will you? Tell them we're boarding a different train for the remainder of the trip. With any luck, this journey may still end tonight."

James nodded. Along with Lucy and Ralph, he climbed to his feet and threaded back through the rear doorway, into the dark train.



The second train wasn't as nice as the *Zephyr*, but it was quiet and moved with similar speed. James found himself in a sparsely populated passenger compartment with most of the rest of his traveling companions. The rocking of the train, and the darkness outside the windows once the city was behind them, lulled him into a mild doze. Finally, an hour or so later, James was awakened by the screech of brakes as the train began to slow. He looked around blearily as his fellow passengers began to stir and collect their things.

"Finally here," Ralph muttered, cupping his hands to the window as a railway station lumbered slowly past. "Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."

"At least the journey's done," Albus commented grumpily.

Near the head of the passenger compartment, James saw Professor Remora sleeping awkwardly, leaning across two seats with her mouth hanging open. One of her students nudged her experimentally.

"I thought vampires loved the night," Lucy mused idly.

"Who, you mean Remora?" Zane said, glancing at Lucy. "Yeah, that's a real puzzler, ain't it?"

Ralph yawned and asked Zane, "How far is the school from here?"

"Just a few blocks away. It's almost right downtown, but you have to know where to look."

Franklyn shouldered his leather attaché and patted his pockets, apparently looking for his glasses. "I'll arrange for our trunks and bags to be delivered to our various quarters via porter.

Tonight, you shall all stay in the Alma Aleron guest house. Tomorrow, I will show you all to your residences for the duration of your stay.”

Harry stood up, carrying Lily as she slept, her head on his shoulder. Ginny followed, and the group began to shuffle toward the car’s doors. It was an unusually quiet group as they filed out onto the deserted platform. A cool mist hung in the air around the huge terminal nearby. In the distance, a clock tower began to toll the hour. James counted the chimes and discovered that it was ten o’clock. Slowly, led by Chancellor Franklyn and Professor Georgia Burke, the group made its way off the platform and into the huge brightly lit terminal. Tall windows framed the space on either side, showing inky black sky.

“This is the 30th Street Station,” Zane announced, too tired to be particularly enthusiastic. “They were going to rename it Benjamin Franklin Station a decade or so ago, but there was some political mish-mash and it never happened. Do yourself a favor and *never* bring it up with the Chancellor.”

As the group made its way through the bank of doors at the far end of the marble floor, they were met by a sweeping view of the city where it huddled on the other side of a broad river. Without stopping, Franklyn led the travelers across the street and onto a wide bridge. Cars and a few buses moved back and forth on the bridge as the travelers made their way along a footpath on the right side.

“It isn’t far,” Franklyn proclaimed over the noise of the traffic. “No Disapparating this close to the station, unfortunately. Not that we could anyway, with so many underage witches and wizards with us.”

Ginny pulled her hair into a ponytail as she walked next to her husband. “I don’t mind stretching my legs a bit, actually.”

“Not the most beautiful city I’ve ever seen,” Albus remarked. “But the river is a delightful shade of orange.”

“That’s just the streetlamps,” Lucy sighed.

“Enjoy the view while you can,” Zane instructed. “Once we get on campus, it might be months before you ever see it again.”

Albus frowned. “Is it a school or a prison?”

“Yes,” Zane quipped. “But the point is, there’s no reason you ever really need to leave. The Aleron’s got everything you need, and quite a few things you don’t. I’ve been there a whole year already and I still haven’t seen the whole campus.”

Shortly, the group left the traffic bridge behind and descended into a warren of densely populated city blocks. Small businesses and gas stations eventually gave way to crowded residential areas. The houses and apartments pressed together like patrons at a bar, shouldering for room in front of the narrow streets. Cars and trucks lined the pavement, glimmering softly in the glow of the streetlights. Trees ranged along the streets as well, huge and old, their roots pushing the footpath into unruly hills and valleys. Finally, the group crossed a narrow intersection and approached a stone

wall, just high enough that no one could see over it. Bits of broken glass were embedded into the mortar along the top.

"Here we are, then," Zane said, nodding approvingly.

Albus was unimpressed. "This is it, is it? I see what you mean about the size of it. You could get lost bending down to tie your shoe."

James looked back and forth along the cracked footpath. The stone wall was no longer than a Hogwarts corridor, with leaning brick pedestals at either end. Embedded in the center of each of the brick pedestals, worn almost to illegibility, was a stone block with a stylized symbol engraved onto it. The symbol appeared to be a shield with two letter 'A's on it, perched upon by an eagle with spread wings. A wrought-iron gate stood in the middle of the wall, facing the street, but the gate was so choked with vines and weeds that the view beyond was completely hidden. Franklyn approached the gate and pulled some of the vines aside, peering in.

"It is I, Flintlock," he said quietly. "Chancellor Franklyn. Our visitors have arrived."

James, Albus, and Lucy crowded through the travelers, eager for a glimpse beyond the overgrown gate.

"It's just a yard," Albus complained. "Where's this big giant campus you were talking about?"

"It's not there yet," Franklyn answered.

"The Timelock!" Ralph said suddenly, remembering. "My dad told me about it last year! Excellent!"

"In time, Mr. Deedle," Franklyn smiled. "So to speak."

James pushed the vines aside and craned to look over Albus' shoulder. Sure enough, the space inside the wall was simply an old yard, choked with weeds and bits of trash. Only two objects seemed to occupy the space. One was a rather fat and overgrown willow tree. The other was a very large jagged boulder.

"He's asleep, Chancellor," Professor Burke sighed, turning away. "Shall I toss a rock at him?"

"You know how irritable he gets when we do such things," Franklyn replied impatiently. "Nobody likes having their own genetic material chucked at them. Let me try once more." Raising his voice a bit, Franklyn cried out again, "Flintlock! It is I, your Chancellor! Do wake up! Our guests are waiting!"

From the yard came a grating snort followed by a low grinding noise. James glanced around, looking for the source of the sound, and was surprised to see the boulder moving slightly. Apparently, it wasn't one boulder, but many smaller rocks piled together, for they began to move independently, not falling apart, exactly, but shifting position, forming a shape that looked strangely, teasingly alive.

"Cool!" Albus cried out suddenly, forgetting the quiet street around him. "It's a rock troll! I've always wanted to see a rock troll!"

The stony shape stood up and began to lumber toward the gate, moving ponderously but heavily, its footsteps shaking the ground faintly.

"Meet Flintlock," Franklyn said, gesturing with one hand. "Our security chief. He's been a part of Alma Aleron ever since... well since before my time. Isn't that right, Flintlock?"

The troll fished a large key from the depths of his rocky crevices and socked it into an iron padlock. In a deep grating voice, the troll said, "I came over with the Mayflower, sir. I remember it like it was yesterday."

Professor Burke smiled wearily. "Of course, in rock troll years, it probably *was* yesterday."

As the gates swung open, squeaking noisily, Albus peered up at the stony creature. "But you must weigh a thousand tons!" he exclaimed. "How would any boat carry you?"

"It didn't carry me," Flintlock replied slowly. He leaned forward, and in what passed as a whisper, he added, "I followed it."

The others passed by Albus as he stared up at the troll, wide-eyed, considering.

"To the Tree," Zane pointed. "This is the best part. Come on!"

Franklyn stopped, allowing everyone else to pass by in front of him. "Yes, yes, as Mr. Walker says, everyone under the Tree. I am sure we are all quite ready for this journey to be over."

James, Ralph, and Lucy joined Petra, Izzy, and the rest in the moonshade of the Tree's drooping branches. James no longer felt tired. Instead, he was filled with a certain giddy excitement, fuelled partly by the misty night air, and partly by the mystery of whatever was about to happen.

"He followed the Mayflower here!" Albus rasped, stabbing a thumb over his shoulder at Flintlock. "He just walked right along the bottom of the ocean, watching the ship way up on the surface! Isn't that the coolest thing you've ever heard in your life?"

"Isn't he coming with us?" Ralph asked, peering aside as the troll stumped back toward the gate, padlock in hand.

"No!" Albus answered, grinning. "He stays here all the time! ALL... the TIME! He says that sometimes Muggle teenagers climb over the walls, glass shards or not, looking for places to get into mischief. He bops 'em to sleep and tosses them in a nearby alley with an empty bottle or two, makes them think they just fell over drunk!"

"Let's see," Franklyn said, crowding under the Tree. "I daresay, what with our visitors, Professor Remora, and her returning students, we are exceeding the legal occupancy limit of the Warping Willow."

"Please, Chancellor," Remora sighed. "Even for creatures such as myself, it has been a very long night. Let us get it over with."

Franklyn nodded and produced a complicated brass instrument from the depths of his robes. James recognized it from his previous experience with the Chancellor. It consisted of various-sized

lenses held in hinged loops. He twisted two of the lenses into alignment, raised the instrument, and peered through it at the moon.

"Ah yes," he said, and then muttered to himself, apparently doing calculations in his head. Finally, he nodded and pocketed the brass instrument. A moment later, he raised his wand and touched it gently to the gnarled trunk of the Tree. In a singsong voice, he said, "Warping Willow, take us hither, days and years or all or none. Wend your way, we travel thither, home to Alma Aleron."

Next to James, Ralph shifted nervously. "I know about Whomping Willows," he whispered, "but what's a *Warping* Willow do?"

Zane whispered back, "Have you ever seen a square-dance?"

"No!" Ralph rasped. "We've been through this already."

Zane bobbed his head back and forth. "Think about what the *Zephyr* did with up and down," he said quietly. "And now think of the *Zephyr* as the Warping Willow, and up and down as now and then."

"It's technomancy again, right?" Ralph moaned as the Tree began to move around them, shifting mysteriously, stirring wind in its long branches. "I hate technomancy."

A cool breeze whistled around the Tree's twisted trunk, threading through James' hair and making the branches sway and hiss. A dull crackle emanated from the depths of the Willow, sounding like pine knots in a fireplace.

In front of James, Izzy gasped. "Look!" she cried, pointing. "The sun's coming up!"

Zane peered at the pinkish glow as it expanded on the horizon. "I may be mistaken," he said, "but I think that's the sun going down. Er, in reverse."

The pink glow spread and brightened, turning orange, and then, sure enough, the sun peeked over the stone wall of the overgrown yard. The yellow orb climbed into the sky with eerie speed, casting hard shadows inside the yard, and then swiftly shortening them. Warm air blew through the Tree and James squinted, finding himself in a sudden hot noontime. The sun began to move faster, sliding back down the sky on the other side of the Warping Willow, which sighed and shushed all around, its branches swaying like curtains.

"What's happening?" Lily asked with a note of fear in her voice.

Ginny pulled the girl up into her arms. "It's all right, Lil," she soothed. "We're still traveling, I think. Only now, we're traveling in time."

Night spread across the sky again, filled with glimmering stars. Now, the moon waltzed overhead, its bony crescent chasing the clouds. Moments later, the sun followed once again, moving so fast that it seemed to be rolling across the sky like a marble. The wind in the Tree increased, shushing the whip-like branches, and James felt movement beneath his feet. He glanced down and saw the Warping Willow's roots twisting through the earth, spreading and shifting like tentacles.

The sky dimmed to night and lightened again to noon, beginning to cycle with dizzying speed. The sun and moon chased each other across the sky, and then blurred into streaks, and then vanished into seamless, silvery arcs of spinning time. The arcs curved across the sky, and seasons began to drift past the outside of the Tree. The grass grew brown, and then grey and listless. Suddenly, snow covered it, sparkling white and piling high, forming drifts against the interior walls of the yard. The snow vanished away again, and now autumn leaves carpeted the ground. Almost immediately, the leaves evaporated, leaving the grass green and lush, peppered with white butterflies. James turned on the spot, transfixed, watching the yard all around as it cycled past seasons and into years, faster and faster, blending into a flickering tableaux of decades, even centuries. And through it all, Flintlock hunkered unmoving, looking like nothing more than a craggy boulder, through flashing eons of sunshine and snow.

Finally, the cycle began to slow, until the seasons became distinct again, and then the streaks of the sun and moon, and finally the alternating lights and darks of days. The Tree sighed and whispered, settling, until the sun lowered for the last time and the sky grew dark, flooded with stars. The moon was a high, full orb now, frosty in the darkness. It slowed, climbing, climbing, and finally crawled to a stop. The Warping Willow relaxed and went still.

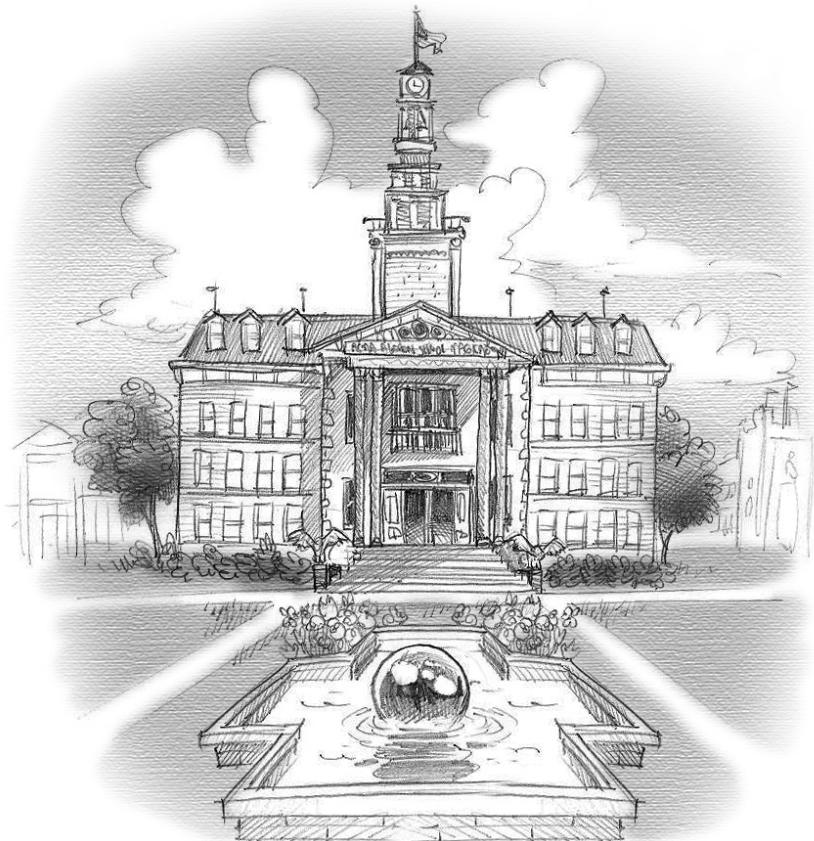
In the sudden silence, Neville Longbottom exhaled a pent breath. “So...,” he asked slowly, “when are we?”

Chancellor Franklyn glanced at him, and then at the watch that hung from a chain around his prodigious waist. “It’s eleven twenty-one,” he answered. “September fourth. Er, seventeen fifty. Give or take a few seconds. It’s hard to be especially accurate about such things.”

“Oh my,” Petra said from behind James. He turned to glance back at her, saw the expression of rapt wonder on her face, and then turned around again, following her gaze.

Beyond the curtains of the Warping Willow’s branches, the yard had grown. The gate was still visible nearby, but the wall it was set in was much wider; so wide, in fact, that James couldn’t see either end. In every other direction, moonlight sifted down onto manicured lawns, sprawling colonial brick buildings, statuary, fountains, and flagstone footpaths. Flickering lampposts dotted the campus, their lights dim and entrancing under the full moon.

“Well,” Percy said, and even he sounded awestruck, “it looks like we’ve finally made it to Alma Aleron.”



7. ALMA ALERON

James had wanted to explore the grounds that very night, but his parents, along with the rest of the adults, had insisted on getting everyone to their rooms and into bed.

The guest quarters were housed in a large brick mansion that overlooked the grounds, relatively near the Warping Willow. Shortly, James had found himself in a surprisingly sumptuous bedroom with a gigantic marble fireplace, nearly as tall as he was, and three four-poster beds so high that they had little wooden stepstools next to them. Albus claimed the one nearest the window and James took the one in the middle. Within minutes, despite the excitement of the night, and the thrill of finally arriving, James had dropped into a deep dreamless sleep.

He seemed to wake almost immediately and blinked at the bright sunshine that beamed through the window, swimming with dust motes. Bird song twittered nearby and as James sat up in his high bed, he could see people moving on the flagstone walkways of the campus below the window. He grinned and saw that Albus was already awake.

"I smell bacon," Albus said, nodding. "The kitchens are in the basement. Come on, let's see if we can nick a little nosh!"

"Way ahead of you," Ralph announced from the other side of the room, shrugging into a very oversized white robe. "Come on, there are two more. One for each of us. Man, this is living."

"I can't imagine that this is what life will be like in the dorms," James replied, grabbing one of the robes, "but when in Rome..."

Together, the three boys tramped down the stairs and down a high, richly paneled hall. Display cases on one side showed a variety of trophies and awards as well as a collection of strange leather sporting balls, most dull and worn with age. On the other side of the hall, framed portraits and photographs peered down. James recognized some of the faces in the images—Abraham Lincoln and George Washington among them—but most were completely unknown to him. Very few of the images moved and James assumed that most of the paintings were, in fact, non-magical.

The boys passed a large sitting room and a coat closet and stopped as they neared a busy dining room, filled with bright morning light from two tall windows. Most of the adults were already gathered around the table, babbling, passing plates, and pouring steaming cups of coffee and tea. Happily, James, Ralph, and Albus ran into the room and found seats around the long table.

"Robes and pyjamas?" Lucy said, blinking aside at James as he climbed into the chair next to her.

"Al smelled bacon," James shrugged. "Be glad he's dressed at all."

Percy spooned sugar into his tea as he spoke, apparently in the middle of a conversation with Chancellor Franklyn, who sat across from him. "So, in order to maintain security and remain hidden in Muggle Philadelphia, Alma Aleron exists in a time bubble in the year seventeen fifty."

"Actually," Franklyn replied, leaning back in his chair and dabbing at his chin with a napkin, "we are now back in the twenty-first century, as of this morning. Twenty forty, I believe. We try to use round numbers, but even so, it can be monstrously difficult to keep track of."

Georgia Burke spoke up next. "The time bubble roams daily, spanning approximately four hundred and fifty years. The historical target of any given day is determined by a complex algorithm based on the actual date, the phase of the moon, and... er... the mood of a certain Kneazle-cat."

"Yes," Franklyn nodded. "Patches, the administration pet. The wizard who designed the algorithm is a believer that there needed to be a single random variable to prevent outsiders from cracking the timecode. He figured that only those that truly deserve to be on campus would know Patches the cat, and her moods. Ingenious, really, but somewhat obtuse, since cats, even of the Kneazle variety, really only have one mood."

"Sullen," Burke agreed. "With various shades of petulant, haughty, aloof, and bored. Still, as a security concept, it is fairly solid."

"Oh, we know all about Kneazle-cats," Izzy commented from across the table. "Remember Crookshanks? Rose's family's cat?" she asked, looking aside at Petra, and then turning to address everyone else at the table, her voice sober. "But Crookshanks isn't sullen at all. He's a sweetheart."

"To you, perhaps," Harry muttered.

"So what if someone hops over the school wall from the inside?" Albus asked around a mouthful of toast. "Would they be able to go explore the future or the past? What if they got lost? Or went and screwed up history somehow?"

Franklyn laughed lightly, as if this were a question he'd had to answer many, many times. "Fortunately for history, the time bubble stops at the boundary of the campus: the stone wall we all observed last night. The moment you climbed over, you'd leave the Timelock and find yourself in the normal flow of time, only locked out of the campus, and with Flintlock to convince to let you back in."

"Ah," Albus said, disappointed.

"At any rate, we have a full day ahead of us," Ginny announced placing her napkin next to her plate. "Lily, we need to get you and Izzy settled in at your new school, elsewhere in the city, and we need to get ourselves squared away with our own flat."

Franklyn cleared his throat. "Harry, I've arranged for an indefinite Floo visa for you and your charges, effective as of this morning. It will allow you free access to the Crystal Mountain and any domestic magical destinations you may require for the duration of your stay."

"That will do nicely," Harry agreed. "But what about communication with my associates abroad? I understand that you have an entire department dedicated to international experimental communications. As you know, Titus Hardcastle, my second-in-command, will be joining me periodically during the investigation. It will be necessary for me to communicate with him regularly and international post is notoriously slow."

At the end of the table, Merlin spoke. "I have foreseen just such a requirement, Mr. Potter. Speak to me in my quarters when you have the opportunity."

Franklyn blinked at Merlin, and then turned to Harry. "And of course, the Department of Experimental Magical Communications will assist you in any way that you might require. I will equip you with a pass that will grant you immediate access to the campus through the main gate. Flintlock knows you now, and will escort you through the Timelock. As you can imagine, however, you cannot Apparate onto the campus from outside of the time bubble, nor can it be accessed via Floo. Alas, our security measures, foolproof as they are, do present their own unique limitations."

"I don't plan on leaving campus at all during my stay," Neville Longbottom announced, smiling. "I've a meeting with the Head of the Flora Department, Professor Sanuye, later this morning, in preparation for my presentation tomorrow night. Frankly, I admit, I'm a wee bit nervous about it."

"You shall do splendidly," Audrey announced confidently. "There is no greater expert on the subject of herbology than you, Professor Longbottom."

"Well," Neville replied, blushing, "that may be stretching it a bit far..."

"As for you four," Ginny said, indicating James, Albus, Ralph, and Lucy, "you are scheduled to meet Zane next to the Octosphere at ten o'clock. He'll show you around the campus and get you prepared for your first day of school. If you plan to wear something other than your pyjamas and those ridiculous robes, I suggest you finish up quickly and change."

"Ugh!" Albus proclaimed suddenly, lifting his cup and staring at it disdainfully. "You call this tea? I'd heard that Americans couldn't brew a decent cup, but really! This tastes like warmed over prune juice!"

"Albus Severus!" Ginny scolded.

Franklyn peered at the cup in Albus' hand. Gently, he reached for it. "Ah, yes. Ahem. It tastes like warmed over prune juice because that's precisely what it is, young man," he said, taking the cup and sniffing it. "You seem to have picked up my drink by accident."

Albus' face reddened as James and his parents laughed. Audrey covered her own mouth to stifle a smile while Percy rolled his eyes. Merlin moved to get up, indicating the end of the meal.

"Oh. Well," Albus said stiffly. "Never mind then."



By daylight, the scale of Alma Aleron campus seemed even larger. Neatly cropped lawns and flower gardens were crisscrossed with paths running in all directions. Some of the footpaths were meandering and narrow, laid with pea gravel, others were wide flagstone thoroughfares, cutting straight swathes between the various buildings.

As James, Albus, Ralph, and Lucy made their way to the center of campus, they encountered innumerable students of nearly every age, most dressed in various versions of the school uniform, which consisted, generally, of a dress shirt, tie, pants, and blazer for the boys, or a blouse, skirt, and tie for the girls. V-necked sweaters were occasionally worn in place of the blazer, especially by the girls, and some students forewent the blazer altogether or carried it slung over their shoulders.

The confusing bit was in the fact that there didn't seem to be an established school colour. As James glanced around, soaking in the sights, he counted at least half a dozen different colour combinations. He did notice, however, that students in similar colours tended to cluster together in knots, either walking swiftly to their classes or hovering near the benches and low walls that dotted the campus, laughing and lounging, occasionally tossing around strange leather sporting balls.

The buildings that comprised the campus were mostly brick, covered in ivy, with dormers and towers jutting from their high roofs. The entrances were wide and grand, with stone staircases leading to banks of heavy wooden doors, many propped open to admit the fresh autumn air. Most of the main buildings seemed to range along a very long narrow common space, dotted with huge

ancient trees, pools, bridges, gardens, and statuary. On the closest end of the commons, near the guest house and the Warping Willow, was something like an old ruin, mostly comprised of stone blocks stacked haphazardly around a grass-filled foundation. The only recognizable portion of the ruin was the main entrance and steps, which seemed ready to collapse at the slightest provocation. A very worn and broken statue of a severely dressed wizard holding a wand at his side stood in front of the entryway, looking as if it had once stood atop a grand pedestal which had, through time and entropy, become buried. The name engraved along the top of the ruin's doorway was barely legible: Roberts.

Across from the ruin, sitting at the far end of the commons like a patriarch at the head of a gigantic table, was a very imposing red brick building with buttresses and stone columns, ranks of tall windows, and a dizzyingly tall clock tower which stood over its impressive central entryway. The school's full name and date of origin were engraved over the columns in huge block letters: '*ALMA ALERON UNIVERSITY of MAGICAL HUMANITIES and SPELLCRAFT – 1688*'. James had an inkling that he'd seen the building before, and then he remembered: it had been in the background of his first glimpse of A.A.U., seen through the magical rear wall of the Trans-Dimensional Garage during his first year at Hogwarts. He'd seen that very clock tower, albeit from a different angle, and heard it tolling the hour. He felt a little surreal now, looking up the building from its own lawns, knowing that he'd be attending school under it, probably for the entire year.

Finally, the four students made their way into the center of the campus commons and stopped beneath one of the massive elm trees that cast their shadows over the grounds, their turning leaves catching the sunlight like kaleidoscopes. Nearby, a grand, terraced pool splashed with fountains, surrounding a strange black marble ball that seemed to float in the very middle.

"Here he comes," Ralph said, mopping his brow with his sleeve. "How can it be so hot here this late in the year?"

Lucy shrugged. "This is mild by their standards. Be glad we didn't arrive in the middle of August. My father says you can boil a cauldron on the footpath during a typical American summer."

"Ugh," Albus grunted, shaking his head.

"I'm disappointed not to be able to try it, really," Lucy said, bending down and laying her palm on the stone at her feet. "This is barely hot enough to soften a jellywort."

"Has it ever occurred to you," Albus said, peering sideways at his cousin, "that your dad might be *full* of jellywort?"

Lucy regarded Albus calmly. "Yes," she said. "Actually it has."

"Morning everybody," Zane said happily, crossing the pool's terraces to meet them. "Sorry I'm a little late. There was an incident last night in my house involving a pledge, an *Engorgio* spell, and a key lime pie. I've never seen such a mess, and it was up to me to make sure it got cleaned up afterwards. The pledges barely swam through half of it. If you ask me, there isn't a Zombie in the bunch."

Lucy frowned. "A key lime pie?"

Ralph glanced at her. "You heard him say the word 'zombie', and the thing that struck you was the pie?"

"He obviously doesn't mean real zombies," Lucy sniffed. "Zombies are forbidden. At least in this country."

Zane raised his voice and pumped his fist in the air. "Zombie pride! Zombie grit! Undead fight and never quit!" He stopped, lowered his fist, and grinned. "Sorry, force of habit. Go Zombies, eh?"

"Whatever you say," James smiled, shaking his head.

"Come on, I'll give you the lowdown while we walk," Zane said, beckoning. "There's a lot to go over and not much time. I have class in half an hour. You can sit in if you want."

"Oh yeah," Albus commented brightly. "That'd be *buckets* of fun."

Lucy smacked her cousin lightly on the back of the head as they stood up. "Give it a rest already, Albus."

"All right," Zane said, turning around and walking backwards, his arms held wide. "This is Alma Aleron's main mall. Most of the classroom buildings are along here, on either side. Back by the Warping Willow, that pile of bricks and stone is the home of one of the original founders. Looks tempting to climb on, but not a good idea. Magic's the only thing holding what's left of it together these days."

"What happened to it?" James asked, looking back over his shoulder at the faded ruin. "Looks like it's a thousand years old."

Zane shrugged. "Sorry, that's not part of the tour. Mainly, 'cause I don't know. I'm sure somebody told me at one time, but I did myself a favor and forgot it as soon as I could. Leaves more room up here for Clutchcudgel and pledge dares," he said, tapping the side of his head with one finger. "Anyway, most of the dormitory houses are on the other side of the classroom buildings. There are six of them, which brings me to the most important part of your life here at the Aleron: which society you end up in."

"Just like the houses at Hogwarts," Lucy nodded, brightening.

"Yes!" Zane said, pointing at her. "And no. Things here are totally different, beginning with the Sorting. Mainly because there isn't one. Here, you have to rush for the society you want to get into. If you don't, or if you blow it during rush, you'll get assigned to a dorm house by the administration, and you don't want that to happen."

James followed Zane over a narrow footbridge, sidling past a knot of students going in the opposite direction. "Why not? You get into a house either way, right?"

"Yeah, but you don't have any say about what house they put you in. It's based entirely on whatever space is available. And houses don't treat leftovers very well. Even Zombie House. I should know."

"Were you a... er... leftover?" Ralph asked.

"Heh," Zane said, glancing back. "No. Let's just say Zombie House's leftovers are still cleaning key lime pie off the basement walls. It's an ugly hierarchy, but an effective one."

"Sounds a bit barbaric," Lucy said mildly.

Zane nodded. "Anyway, there's six societies here, all originally named for Greek mythology, which the founding fathers were all just mad about. Nobody really calls them by their Greek names anymore, though, so don't worry about trying to remember it all. The societies have been in existence since the beginning of the school and they were designed to accommodate pretty much any magical personality type."

He stopped and turned around again, gesturing between two nearby buildings. "See that old mansion back there, behind Rhines Hall? That's Hermes Mansion, otherwise known as the home of the Zombies, where I live. My dorm is in the top right window, next to the tower. Zombies are perseverant and mischievous, adaptable to almost any situation. Just like me, eh?"

Albus nodded. "Hermes House Zombies are also known for having questionable judgment and requiring a lot of supervision."

Lucy, James, and Ralph glanced aside at Albus, eyebrows raised.

"What?" Albus said, spreading his hands. "Lucy's not the only one who can read, you know! It was in a booklet I found in our room last night."

Zane rolled his eyes. "Well, you're right, technically. If you ask anybody else, they'll tell you that Zombie House is the home of punks, rebels, and troublemakers. But they only say that 'cause they're jealous. Our colours are bile yellow and black."

"What about the other societies?" Lucy asked.

"All right," Zane said, raising his hand and beginning to count them off on his fingers. "Besides the Hermes House Zombies, there's Erebus, better known as Vampire House, headed up by Professor Remora, who you already met. They're all dramatic and morose, and they take themselves super seriously. You can tell them by their black and blood red uniforms, and by the fact that most of them are as pale as the moon and like to let their hair flop all over their eyes so they have to pull it out of the way just to see who's making fun of them. And it's usually a Zombie," he added proudly.

"Then there's the Aphrodite House Pixies. They're all cheerleader types, hung up on looking good and who has the most expensive broom and who's still wearing last season's designer cape. They're not bad, if you can get past the ego, and nobody can out-charm them when it comes to school politics and debates. They even have some real-life Veelas in Pixie House. Their colours are pink and yellow since those are the colours that are most commonly in fashion."

Zane started walking again, leading the group toward the main administration building at the end of the commons. "Next is Ares House, commonly known as the Werewolves. They're the military types, and the jocks of the campus. Their house is the one up on Victory Hill, behind the admin building. They've won that spot for twelve years in a row since nobody can beat them in the Clutch tournament. Werewolves are arrogant and tough, and they don't have much respect for anyone who isn't like them, so you'll want to steer clear of them unless you are one. Their colours

are slate grey and burgundy, like military uniforms. There's their president over there, Professor Jackson."

James blinked and turned to look. Professor Theodore Jackson strode through the sunlight on the other side of the campus, wearing a slate grey coat and a dark burgundy ascot, his steely brow low. He apparently hadn't noticed James or the rest of his group, and James was glad.

"Then there's Hephaestus House, home of the Igors. They're just about the exact opposite of the Werewolves. Igors are technomancy and alchemy freaks, and they're dead geniuses at clockwork. Most of them spend so much time in their house laboratory that they hardly ever know what's going on around the rest of the campus. They talk a big game about taking over the world and creating doomsday devices, but they're really pretty harmless when you get to know 'em. You can tell them by their acid green uniforms."

Zane stopped at the base of the steps to the administration building, which was the enormous brick edifice with the clock tower. He turned and pointed across the campus, back the way they'd come. "And finally, there's the Bigfoots, Apollo House. They have that mansion way back there on the other side of the ruin, about as far from Victory Hill as possible. Bigfoots are nice guys, but there's nothing really interesting about them. They're a friendly, hardworking, upstanding bunch of fairly competent witches and wizards, which explains why everybody forgets about them about two seconds after they meet them."

"They sound like a very decent group," Lucy said, peering at the distant house.

"That's exactly my point!" Zane exclaimed. "They field a respectable Clutch team, but their spell game is totally weak, which explains why they never win. Their House President is a decent guy, can't remember his name. Professor Birch, or Bark, or something like that. Teaches Ethics of Magic at the college level. *Way* boring."

"Hold on," Albus said, raising a hand. "So this is supposed to be the best wizarding school in the whole United States, and you're telling me the best your people could come up with for house names was a bunch of half-rate monsters?"

"I suspect the Vampires, at least, would object to the term 'half-rate,'" Lucy interjected.

Zane rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, join the club. Remember, I'm still a Ravenclaw to the core. When I got here last year, I told them how lame it all was compared to life at Hogwarts. Surprisingly, none of that went over very well. The point is, these nicknames were voted on by students, a hundred years or so ago, and they obviously weren't the most imaginative bunch. If you think monster names are bad, though, you should have seen the *original* society names from back when they started the school! The founding fathers may have been geniuses in a lot of ways, but deciding mascots wasn't one of them."

"How's that?" Lucy asked.

"Well," Zane said, lowering his voice, "those were the same guys that eventually decided the symbols for our political parties should be an elephant and a donkey. Benjamin Franklin himself voted against making our national symbol an eagle. You know what he wanted it to be? A turkey!"

Albus shook his head, grinning. "You're joking."

Zane straightened. "I wish I was, dude. He's still a little rankled about it, and it's been *centuries!* But anyway, like 'em or not, that's all the house societies. They'll grow on you once you get settled into your own. Rush week is still going on, so you still have a chance to pledge for a good house. I vote Zombie for the lot of you, but we'll have to ask Patches."

"Patches?" Albus blinked. "The administration cat?"

"He's a Kneazle," Zane corrected. "And he has a sixth sense about such things. You can apply for whatever house you want, but it's tradition for new students to consult Patches first. It's fun. In fact, there he is now."

James looked in the direction Zane indicated. In the far corner of the stone stairway, lying in the shadow of a statue of a huge eagle, was a perfectly ordinary looking calico cat. Its eyes were closed but the tip of its tail flicked restlessly, as if the cat was only pretending to be asleep.

"Come on," Zane grinned. "Let's ask him."

"This is some kind of prank you all play on new students," Albus said, lagging behind. "I can appreciate that. I won't be falling for it though."

"Suit yourself," Zane replied, unperturbed. He hunkered down in front of the cat and scratched it between the ears. "Hey Patches, how's everybody's little kitty-boy doing?" he said, as if he was talking to a baby. "Yeah, that's it. You like getting scratched between the ears, don'cha? You feeling like helping out some of my friends today? Sharing a little of that crazy feline intuition?"

Slowly, Patches slit his green eyes and peered up at James. His tail flicked.

"This is James," Zane went on, glancing back. "I know he's a day or two late, but he's come a long way, so he has a good excuse. You want to give him a little push in the right direction, society-wise?"

The cat continued to regard James thoughtfully. James could hear him purring as Zane petted him. Finally, the cat stood up, stretched and yawned luxuriously, and padded away into the sunlight.

"Thus spake Zaruthustra," Albus quipped, rolling his eyes.

"Shh," Zane said, raising one hand.

Patches paced toward the administration building's open doors, tail held high, and then stopped with his left front paw raised. He turned to look back, as if making sure that the students were watching.

"Look where his foot is," Lucy whispered, nudging James with her elbow.

James looked closer. Engraved into the stone blocks of the steps was a line of six symbols. The one closest to James was a bat, its wings half-furled. The cat was standing over one of the symbols in the middle, its right paw resting right in the middle of it.

"That can't be right, Patches," Zane said, frowning.

"What is it?" James said, squinting. "I left my glasses in my duffle bag. I can't see the symbol."

Zane sighed. "It's a glass beaker with electric bolts coming out of it, the symbol of Igor House. Patches, James is no Igor. Technomancy isn't his thing. He's an expert with defensive magic. He's a Zombie all the way. Go on, go over to the cross-eyed skull."

To James' surprise, the cat almost seemed to shake its head. It stayed on the Igor symbol, its left foot raised, its right planted right in the center of the engraved beaker.

"I'm pretty sure I'm not an Igor," James commented.

"Yeah, well, stupid old cat," Zane agreed, peering sidelong at Patches. "Good thing it isn't like the Sorting Hat back at good ol' Hoggies. You can pledge at whatever house you want, regardless of what *he* says."

"Do me now!" Albus proclaimed, stepping forward. "Let James go to the spods. What about me, Patches, ol' buddy?"

The cat regarded Albus coolly, and then put down his left paw. Slowly, he meandered along the symbols and stopped at one near the end. The shape was obvious enough that even James could make it out. It was a werewolf.

Albus nodded, grinning. "Excellent. Wolves it is."

"What about Ralph, then?" Zane asked, pushing the bigger boy forward.

Patches studied Ralph for a long time, his green eyes narrowed. Finally, he sat down, licked his flank a few times, got up again, and walked in a large circle. When he was done, his right foot rested on the beaker again.

"Somebody's putting catnip in your Tender Vittles, puss," Zane said, shaking his head. "Ralph's even less of an Igor than James here. He didn't even take Technomancy when he had the chance."

"It's true," Ralph said to the cat. "I can't even spell 'technomancy'."

Patches lifted his nose and yawned again, as if bored.

Lucy walked over to Patches and hunkered down on one knee. "Hi Patches," she said, tilting her head. "I'm Lucy Weasley. Where do you think I belong?"

Patches strolled forward and rubbed against Lucy's leg, purring loudly. He walked around her and then angled toward the opposite end of the line of symbols. His shadow fell over the bat as he walked around it considerably. Finally, he stopped and touched the center of the bat with his right paw.

Zane bobbed his head back and forth. "Could be right on that one," he said. "You do seem to have a little of that 'creature of the night' mystique going for you, Lucy."

"But I really dislike that Remora woman," Lucy said, reaching forward to pet Patches again. "She's so vain and ridiculous."

Zane raised his eyebrows and poked a finger into the air. “All types come in all houses. That’s a direct quote from my House President, the dapper Jersey Devil himself.”

“What’s it supposed to mean?” Ralph asked, confused.

“It means that no house is all good or all bad,” Zane answered, hefting his backpack. “There’s obnoxious twits in every society, not just the Vampires. There’s even a few duds among us Zombies. On the other hand, there’s decent types in every house too, although they’re a little fewer and far between in some. Don’t worry about it, Lucy. If you do pledge Vampire House, you’ll find a few like-minded people there despite Remora’s best efforts.”

“So where do we stay until we get into a society?” Ralph asked.

“There’s a common dorm behind the guest house,” Zane said, nodding back the way they had come. “Your stuff’s probably been sent there already. You’ll want to get out of there as soon as you can. They haven’t updated the common dorm in, like, three hundred years. If I was you, I’d get inside right now and sign up for one of the societies. The initiation process will start pretty much immediately. While you’re in there, you can get your class assignments sorted out and sign up for any clubs or sports you want to get involved with.” He stepped aside and gestured toward the Administration Hall’s main doors. “Unless, that is, you want to come along with me to Precognitive Engineering.”

“No thanks,” James sighed. “I think we better get all of this out of the way as soon as we can.”

“And I don’t know about the rest of you,” Albus added, “but I’ll put off starting classes as long as I can.”

“I’d like to come along with you, actually,” Lucy said, moving to stand next to Zane. “Unlike these two, I am anxious to see what classes look like here. I’ll settle the official arrangements after lunch.”

“This way, then,” Zane said, offering Lucy his elbow. “Precog isn’t as hard as it used to be, apparently, now that Madame Delacroix is in a padded room in the medical complex, but it’s still a challenge. Stick close and I’ll show you the ropes.”

James shook his head as the two headed away into the throng of students.

“So,” Ralph said, moving hesitantly toward the Administration Hall doors, “are you going to sign up for Igor House?”

James scoffed. “No way. I’m going for Zombie House. With apologies to Patches over there.”

“That’s what I was thinking too,” Ralph nodded. “Although I can’t help wondering what that cat knows that we don’t.”

“You’re both daft,” Albus said seriously. “That cat’s got some kind of mental link with the cosmos or something. It can see right into your soul, just like the Sorting Hat back home. Did you see how quick it was to figure out I belonged in Werewolf House? That’s the house of sporting

greats, strength and order. If the cat says you two are a couple of Igor spods, then you shouldn't argue with it. Patches knows his stuff."

James pushed his brother out of the way as he turned toward the Administration Hall doors. "A minute ago, you thought the cat was just a freshman prank."

"Ugh," Ralph said, following. "I thought I was through with all of this. I was just starting to get comfortable with Slytherin. Now we have to start all over again."

Albus frowned. "I love Slytherin, but I have a feeling that me and the Wolves are going to get along just fine."

"At least Quidditch isn't as big a deal over here as it is back home," Ralph commented, stepping into the echoing shadows of the Hall's lobby.

James frowned. "Why is that a good thing?"

"Well," Ralph grinned, clapping his friend on the shoulder, "it improves your chances of making the team, doesn't it?"

Albus hooted laughter, and the sound of it echoed throughout the grand, dark lobby.



Twenty minutes later, the three boys emerged into the sunlight again, studying their class assignments.

"Do either of you have Clockwork Mechanics?" Albus asked. "I can't even imagine what that is."

"Hardly any of these make any sense," Ralph agreed. "Look here: Muggle Occupation Studies. What's that about?"

"Hey!" a voice called nearby, startling the three. James looked around and saw a pair of older students standing next to the doors of the Administration Hall. One, a girl, wore a dark slate skirt, matching button-down sweater and a burgundy tie. Black hair framed her dark, severe face. The other, a boy older than James, had bright green hair cut into a stripe that ran from his brow to the base of his neck. He wore a screamingly yellow tie and black pants. The crest on his blazer identified him as a member of Zombie House.

"Are you talking to us?" Ralph asked querulously.

"Do you see any other new students who've gotten it into their heads to pledge the Hermes House Zombies?"

"And the Ares Werewolves," the girl added, smiling crookedly. "Which one of you is Albus Potter?"

Albus jumped to attention and did his best salute. James knew it was an attempt to be funny, and knew as well that it would fail miserably.

"On the ground, pledge," the girl barked, pointing to the portico floor. "Salutes are for those who serve. You'll make up for that mockery by giving me thirty."

Albus was halfway onto his face on the hot stone. He stopped and glanced up at the taller girl. "Er, thirty what? Galleons? Kisses? Sorry, I'm not from around here. Is this some sort of bribe?"

The girl grinned again. She hunkered down in front of Albus so that her face was only a foot from his. "Thirty *pushups*, Cornelius," she said sweetly. "And just to make sure you remember, you'll do them one-handed."

"*Cornelius?*" Ralph muttered.

"Pushups," Albus moaned. "That's, like, exercise, right?"

The girl nodded and produced her wand from the sleeve of her white blouse. "Here. I'll get you started."

She flicked her wrist and Albus levitated smartly into the air. A moment later, he plopped back down onto his hands and the tips of his toes.

"That's one," the girl said, still smiling. "Now count them out."

Albus grunted as he began to count, touching his nose to the stone and pushing himself up.

"As for you two," the boy said, moving close to Ralph and James and looking them up and down, "I wouldn't have picked you out of a meat locker lineup, but you come with a decent recommendation from one of my house members. Zane Walker says you were members of the Gremlins. Is that so?"

James blinked. "How do you know about them?"

The boy cuffed James lightly over the ear and grinned. "I just explained it. Zane told me. So were you members or not?"

"Yeah," James said, rubbing the side of his head. The cuff hadn't really hurt, but he felt he should do something more than just absorb it.

"I *suppose* I was a member," Ralph said, thinking hard. "I mean, unofficially, I guess. There was never any swearing in, if you know what I mean..."

"We take initiation seriously in Zombie House," the boy said. "My name's Warrington. You'll call me... let's see... you'll call me 'Mr. Warrington, his grand exalted poobahness'. Until I tell you otherwise. Understood?"

"Yeah," James said wearily, nodding.

"Yeah, what?" Warrington prodded, leaning closer.

"Yeah, Mr. Warrington, your grand exalted, er... poobahness?"

"Close enough," the boy said, straightening again. "So you're James Potter and this ton o' bricks here is Ralph Deedle, both of you from jolly old England. All right, then. Here's what I want you both to do right now. I want you to run along to Hermes Mansion and introduce yourselves to the rest of the Zombies. But you can't go inside, you understand. You're only pledges, and pledges have to be invited in. So, *you'll* have to stand outside and yell. Tell everybody in the house your name, who recommended you, and why we should make you official members. And wear these."

Warrington held out two hats. James was not exactly surprised to see that they were yellow and black beanies, with gently spinning propellers on the tops. Some things, of course, were just tradition no matter what country you were in. Slowly, he and Ralph took them.

"Put 'em on now," Warrington grinned. "Show some house pride, why don't you? When I get back to the house, in an hour, I want to see you outside, hard at work. And when I get *inside*, I want the rest of the Zombies to be able to tell me everything about you that I need to know, with no exceptions. Got it?"

"Yes," James sighed, jamming the beanie onto his head.

"Yes, *what?*" Warrington prodded again.

"Yes, Mr. Warrington," both boys said in sloppy unison, "your grand exalted poobahness."

"Nah, I don't want to be called that anymore," Warrington said, cupping his chin. "Now, you will refer to me as 'Captain Warrington, the Superduke of the Realm of Coolness'. Remember that. I don't want to have to remind you. Now run!"

He shooed James and Ralph, who turned and trotted haphazardly down the steps of the Administration Hall, leaving Albus grunting out pushups on the portico.

"I didn't realize," Ralph panted as they began to cross the campus, "that running... would be part of the deal."



8. THE VAULT OF DESTINIES

It was amazing, James reflected the next day, how similar life at Hogwarts and life at Alma Aleron could be while being so simultaneously completely different.

He and Ralph had spent most of the previous afternoon in the basement of Hermes Mansion wearing their ridiculous propeller beanies and being grilled by senior members of the Zombies about why they should be allowed to join, all the while crawling around on the basement's ratty carpets and poking into the dusty rafters in search of spiders, which they were instructed to collect and save in a large jar. James had half worried that part of their initiation would include eating the spiders that they were in the process of collecting and had purposely avoiding capturing several of the larger ones. By ten o'clock, Zane had been there as well, munching a huge bowl of popcorn with his feet kicked up on an old footstool covered in yellow shag carpeting. Warrington, who by then had chosen to be referred to as 'High Sultan Warrington, Master of the Fighting Freemuds of the Second-Floor Sectional Couch', had inspected Ralph's and James' jar of spiders with a critical eye. Dozens of the arachnids scrambled over each other in the bottom of the jar, their tiny legs making a slightly maddening scritching sound on the glass.

"Not bad, pledges," Warrington had proclaimed reluctantly. "You got sixteen more than Zane here did on his first night."

"No fair!" Zane had exclaimed, sitting upright in the old recliner by the stairs. "There's two of them!"

"Yeah," Warrington had grinned, unscrewing the lid of the jar. "But you cheated, Walker. You transfigured half of your spiders out of ants, centipedes, and even a few stale potato chips. Most of them didn't even have the right number of legs."

Zane had slumped backwards in the chair again. "That's what you all loved about me, if I recall. Creative cheating is a Zombie core value. You told me so yourself."

"Indeed I did," Warrington had nodded, upending the jar over the stained carpet. The spiders had poured out and scrambled away in all directions, scuttling under the furniture and into dark corners.

"What'd you do that for?" Ralph had exclaimed, his eyes bulging. James had noticed that the propeller on Ralph's head spun faster when he was agitated. It had very nearly lifted him off the floor when he'd discovered the black widow's nest in the shadow of the stairs.

"Sorry, pledges," Warrington had replied soberly. "It's purely catch-and-release in Zombie House. Otherwise, what will the next batch of pledges have to chase after? Why, some of those spiders are like family by now."

"I remember the big orange and purple one from my first night here," Zane had said wistfully. "I found it on my pillow wearing a pair of fake plastic fangs."

The room had erupted into gales of appreciative laughter and Warrington had grinned indulgently at Zane.

Shortly, James and Ralph had been dismissed, accompanied by the well wishes and encouragement of Zane, who'd told them that he thought the evening had gone splendidly well.

"You two are shoo-ins," he'd said as he walked them to the path in front of Hermes Mansion. "Really. Warrington likes you, otherwise he'd have made you personally return every spider to its nest. As long as you accomplish tomorrow's pledge dare, you'll be in like lint."

James had asked Zane what the dare would be, but Zane had shaken his head. "If I knew, I'd tell you, but I don't. Since you only got here during the last few days of pledge week, it'll probably be a big one. But you can pull it off. Don't sweat it."

James tried not to think about it as he and Ralph made their way across the dark campus.

The common dorm was a stone block construction that loomed like a giant mausoleum in the shadow of the guest house, with no lanterns to light it and nearly every window dark. In the tiny entryway, James and Ralph found their trunks and Nobby's battered cage, inside of which the great owl eyed James balefully.

"Sorry, Nobby," James soothed, kneeling in front of the cage and opening the door. "I nearly forgot all about you. Go on outside and get some dinner, but don't go far. I'll find out tomorrow where they keep owls around here."

The owl hopped out of the cage and ruffled his feathers. With a disgruntled hoot, he spread his wings and took off through the open front door.

"There's a note from your mum," Ralph said, taking an envelope from the top of his trunk. "It's addressed to all of us. You, me, Lucy, and Albus."

James plopped onto his trunk and pulled the beanie from his head. "Go ahead and read it," he said, flapping a hand vaguely.

Ralph drew the note from the unsealed envelope and unfolded it. "Dear children," he began, and then looked at James. "Children?"

"Just go on," James prodded, shaking his head wearily.

"I hope you've settled in OK with your classes and house assignments. We all miss you already, although we'll be sure to see you tomorrow night at Professor Longbottom's assembly. Your new school uniforms are in your trunks. Be good and we'll see you tomorrow. Love,' blah, blah, blah, she put everybody's names here, even Headmaster Merlin."

"That's my mum," James smiled crookedly.

"There's something written on the back," Ralph said, turning the note over. "It's from Lucy. She says... she's spending the night at Vampire House with her new mates, and then she writes 'I'll probably see you three at class in the morning if you don't sleep in or skip it or forget you're on American time now'. Blimey, she can be a nag, can't she?"

James shrugged. "That's how the women in my family show love, I think."

"You think Albus is already here somewhere," Ralph asked, grunting as he lugged his trunk toward a rickety dumbwaiter built into the wall next to the staircase. A very tarnished brass statue of a monkey in a bellhop uniform stood on a shelf next to the dumbwaiter door.

"I don't know," James sighed, standing and hefting his own trunk. "Maybe he got lucky like Lucy and is spending the night at his new house."

Ralph socked his trunk into the large dumbwaiter compartment and James used his wand to levitate his own on top of Ralph's. The brass monkey sprang jerkily to life, squeaking as if it desperately needed to be oiled. It clambered into the dumbwaiter, sidling next to the stacked trunks, and pulled the door shut. A moment later, a ratcheting noise marked the compartment's ascent into the floors above.

"How does it know where to go?" James asked, peering at the closed door. Ralph shrugged and the two of them struck off in search of the bathrooms.

The common dormitory turned out to be just as dank, moldy, and woefully outdated as Zane had implied. When Ralph turned on the faucets, a mixture of rusty orange water, dirt, and the occasional worm spilled out, and continued for several minutes while the boys let it run. Finally, they satisfied themselves by heading back outside and splashing off in a nearby fountain. In the center of the fountain, a monstrous birdbath seemed to regard them coolly from the eyes of a half dozen stone gargoyles.

"Foreigners," one of the gargoyles muttered, rolling its eyes.

Ralph and James chucked pinecones at the statues for a few minutes, but soon realized that nothing is quite as imperturbable as a stone gargoyle. Eventually, exhausted, the boys stumped back inside and, after a short search, found their trunks kicked out onto the hallway carpet of the top floor. There, they found an empty dormitory room and dropped immediately to sleep on the ancient, bowed beds.

The next day, James and Ralph's first class was Wizard Home Economics, which was held in the cellars of the Administration Hall, in what, for all intents and purposes, appeared to be a converted dungeon. Low vaulted ceilings were supported by squat pillars, and James had the unsettling sense that he could feel the weight of the massive building above, pressing down on the space. All in all, he found the classroom nearly indistinguishable from some of the more cobwebbed classrooms at Hogwarts.

The Wiz Home Ec teacher was a fat, wizened old witch with rosy cheeks, frizzy white hair that seemed to have a very rich life of its own, and sparkling black eyes that darted over the classroom mischievously, as if she wasn't exactly sure if she wanted to teach the children or cook them in an enormous pie. Her name, as it turned out, was Professor Betsy Bartholemew Ryvenwicke Newton, however she instructed her students to refer to her merely as Mother Newt. Smiling in a grandmotherly fashion, she began to stack cauldrons, pots, and pans on her expansive desk, launching into an introductory explanation of the class. Zane, who sat between James and Ralph at a table in the rear of the room, leaned aside to James.

"She may look like last decade's cinnamon bun," he whispered behind his hand, "but don't mess with old Ma Newt. She's as tough as a Bigfoot's heel callus and twice as stinky if you get her riled up."

Ralph slumped in his seat and fiddled with his quill. "Isn't Home Ec a girlie class?" he whispered gloomily, but Zane interrupted him, shushing urgently and holding a finger to his lips.

"What's that?" Mother Newt asked suddenly, interrupting herself at the front of the classroom. She raised her chin and peered over the heads of the students. Her black gaze found Zane and she offered him a rather charming smile. "A question, Mr. Walker?"

"No, no," Zane replied, grinning a little manically. "It's nothing."

"Someone back there implied that Wizarding Home Economics is... I'm sorry," she said, frowning slightly. "My poor hearing isn't what it used to be. What did your friend call it?"

"Er..." Ralph muttered, his face turning dark red. "Er, er... I was just asking. I'm new here."

Mother Newt nodded comfortingly, closing her eyes. "Yes, yes. Mr. Deedle, from our wizarding neighbors across the sea. I've heard much about you and your friends. What was it you were wondering, young man? Don't be shy with your old Mother Newt."

Emboldened, Ralph sat up a little. "Well," he said, glancing around. The eyes of the rest of the class had all turned to him, most wide and serious. One or two students shook their heads very

faintly, warningly. Ralph gulped and went on. "I, er... I always thought... pardon me for saying... that home economics was a girl's study."

"Oh no," Mother Newt answered soothingly, smiling again. "A common misconception, dear boy, I assure you. No, you see, the truth is..." here, the professor stepped away from her desk, backing into the shadows of the high cupboards that lined the dungeon's front wall, "the truth is that Home Economics is not at all a *girl's* study... it is, in fact, a *woman's* study."

In the shadows, Newt raised her hands swiftly, and the sleeves of her robes fell back, revealing surprisingly lean, strong arms. "Home economics is more than a mere class. It is the lifetime pursuit of only the most rare and powerful woman. A fierce, *cunning* woman, a witch whose wiles are without depth, whose motives are infinitely unplottable, and whose boundless potential is kept in check only by her own willing discipline..."

Lightning crackled from Newt's upraised wand and her fingertips, licking along the faces of the cabinets. Her voice lowered, but grew louder, echoing. "The sort of witch whose minions exist only at her tolerance, only to serve her unknowable whims, moved either by fear of her or love for her, forever beguiled and bewitched, whether they *know* it... or *not!*"

Thunder boomed suddenly in the enclosed space of the dungeon and a cold gust of wind swirled around the room, clapping the cupboard doors and snuffing out candles in the wall sconces. At their desks, students held onto their parchments and quills as the wind rushed over them, streaming through the girls' hair and flapping the boys' ties. A skeleton on a metal stand in the corner rattled and swayed. Its jaw clacked as if it was laughing. A moment later, as quickly as it had begun, the wind ceased. The lighting in the room returned to normal. With a series of small pops, the extinguished candles relit themselves.

"Does that answer your question, my dear?" Newt said sweetly, smiling in front of her desk once again, as if she had not moved an inch.

"Y-yes ma'am," Ralph said quickly, sitting bolt upright in his seat. "Clear as crystal."

"Good," Mother Newt replied warmly, her eyes twinkling. "Now where were we? Oh yes, the basic essentials of any magical kitchen, beginning with ladles. Do pay attention, students. There may be a quiz."

Forty minutes later, as the class shuffled out into the low hallway, each bearing a miniature poisonberry muffin that Mother Newt had helped them prepare in the classroom's goblinfire oven, Zane explained, "Ma Newt is the President of Pixie House. Theirs is the big gingerbread mansion, Aphrodite Heights, up on the hill behind the theater. She's a good example of why you don't want to underestimate a Pixie even if they *do* look like a bunch of frosted lemon cookies."

"I've met a few Pixies," Lucy said falling in line next to the three boys. "I don't think most of them are like Mother Newt. *She's* got issues."

Zane laughed. "Oh, you've got no idea. Trust me."

James eyed the miniature muffin in his hand. "Are these safe to eat? I mean... poisonberry?"

"It's just a name," Zane shrugged, adjusting his backpack. "Like plaguepoppies or deathshrooms. They're delicious. On the other hand, if anyone tries to get you to eat a blisscake... watch out."

"Have any of you seen Albus?" Lucy asked, climbing the stone steps to the Administration Hall's long foyer.

Zane nodded. "I saw him this morning in the cafeteria, following around a gang of senior Werewolves. They had him carrying all their trays, balancing them like it was some kind of circus trick. I was pretty impressed, to tell you the truth. He was levitating the last one with his wand between his teeth."

"He'll get in," Lucy said confidently. "Albus is tenacious when he wants to be."

"Tenacious is one way to put it," James commented, shaking his head.

At the Administration Hall stairs, Lucy bid the boys goodbye and headed off to the Tower of Art for her Wizlit class. As the three boys made their way across campus to the Applied Magical Sciences Building, a figure trotted up to them over a nearby lawn. James glanced aside and saw that it was Warrington.

"Hey Walker," he called. "Pledges. Hold up a minute."

James and Ralph stopped and began to mumble, "Yes, oh High Sultan Warrington, Leader of the—"

"Can it," Warrington interrupted. "Listen up. Your pledge dare is all set, and tonight's the night. You'll find everything you need in a trash can behind the common dorm. Look for the one with the big yellow 'Z' hexed onto its side. Walker, you get them started, all right? You'll know what to do. But don't help them!"

"Aye aye, captain," Zane said, smacking the back of his hand to his forehead.

"But tonight's Professor Longbottom's assembly," James said, turning to Zane as Warrington trotted away again. "We can't miss that!"

"That's this *evening*," Zane said, shaking his head. "When a Zombie says 'tonight', what he really means is, oh, sometime in the wee hours of the next morning. Get the picture?"

"Ah," James replied, frowning a little.

Ralph looked worried. "So what's the dare, then?"

"We'll know when we peek into the garbage can behind the common dorm," Zane answered simply. "No time now, though. We've got Mageography next, and Professor Wimrinkle is known to dock grades for tardiness. He's wound so tight he squeaks when he walks. Come on."

Mageography was held in a huge round room in the base of the Applied Magical Sciences Building's dome. The floor was terraced like an amphitheater, lined with tables and chairs. Enormous maps surrounded the upper reaches of the room, floating in bulky gilded frames. James was not surprised to see that the map images, most of which were ancient, hand-drawn in faded

browns, reds, and greens, moved very slightly. They were enchanted, of course, showing the movements of the rivers and oceans, and even the ant-like crawl of tiny boats and magical vehicles.

"I hear that if you use a special magnifying glass," Zane whispered, heading toward a seat in the middle terrace, "that you can see tiny people moving in the cities and stuff. You could probably even find yourself if you looked hard enough."

"That must be what my dad meant," Ralph replied thoughtfully. "He told me that one of the purposes of school was to find yourself."

James groaned and Zane rolled his eyes. Ralph looked affronted.

As the three settled into their seats and produced their parchments and quills, James saw Albus saunter into an entrance on the other side of the room. He spotted James, Ralph, and Zane and waved, grinning. Behind him, a tall boy in a slate grey uniform gave him a little shove. Albus lurched forward amiably and moved to a seat in the front row followed by three severe-looking Werewolf House students. One of them was the dark girl that had met them outside of the Administration Hall the previous day.

"Looks like Al's doing all right," Zane muttered.

James peered down at his brother. "How can you tell?"

Zane shrugged simply. "No bruises that I can see. Always a good sign with Werewolf House."

Professor Wimrinkle entered the room from a door near his desk. He was very old, stooped, and wore very thick black spectacles which magnified his eyes so much that he looked rather perpetually surprised. He placed his leather portfolio neatly onto the desk and, without preamble, announced in a loud voice, "Number four nib quills, please, and a single sheet of forty weight parchment. Today: the Nile Delta and surrounding lowlands."

The professor adjusted his glasses studiously as one of the maps drifted down from the upper reaches of the room, moving into place behind his desk.

"For new students, I will only say this once: I do not allow Quick-Quotes Quills or recording charms in this class. You will pay attention, and you will kindly take your own notes and draw your own maps. As the rest of you know, there is no point in my telling you that talking out of turn is forbidden in my class. If you intend to receive a passing grade, you will be so busy keeping up with me that there will be no time for you to open your mouths. Questions will be submitted to my secretary, where they will be answered during scheduled office hours. And now..."

Wimrinkle lifted his wand, which telescoped into a long pointer. He clacked its tip to a point on the map without looking. "The Nile river is generally considered to be the longest river in the world," he said in a loud monotone, "and the home to some of the magical world's most exotic and interesting creatures and fishes, none of which we shall be discussing. The river's flow rate is approximately thirty-seven thousand square feet per second, resulting in a geographical delta shift of fifteen degrees average every year, which in turn results in a hydromagical plottability meter of two-

point-oh-seven gigapokuses every eight years. As you might imagine, this leads to a terrain hexology rating of, can anyone tell me? Anyone?"

No one in the room seemed eager to attempt an answer and the professor didn't seem at all surprised. He answered his own question and plowed onward, his voice echoing in the high dome overhead. James scribbled notes furiously, trying to keep up.

Sighing, he realized for the first time just how sorely he was going to miss Rose and her prodigious note taking during this school year.



The rest of the day went by in a blur. James, Ralph, and Zane had lunch in the school's cafeteria, which was located in the topmost basement level of Administration Hall. Its mint green brick walls, tiny windows set at ceiling height, long lines of students carrying metal trays, and overpowering smell of milk and goulash made James feel as if he had been transported to the mess hall in Azkaban. The noise of the chattering students was like a flock of magpies, ringing in the room's low confines.

"So the original builders of Administration Hall were dwarves," Zane said, raising his voice over the noisome throng. "Excellent guys to have around for any construction project but with interesting views about use of space. I learned about them in Magi-American History. According to the dwarves, the Muggle building model is a weed, with most of the structure above the ground and very little root. The wizard building model is a turtle: low and secret, with a wide foundation. Dwarves, though, their building model is an iceberg."

"Ninety percent below the surface?" Ralph clarified around a mouthful of goulash.

Zane nodded. "There's more sub-basements, cellars, and dungeons in this place than anyone can count. I've heard stories about students going exploring into the lower stairwells and finding whole tribes of giant rats, entrances to huge underground rivers, even forbidden rooms with doors the size of dinosaurs and magical glowing locks that no one can open."

James was impressed. "Have you seen any of those things?"

"No," Zane sighed sorrowfully. "Everything below the upper dungeons is prohibited and guarded by some ancient old witch none of us has ever seen. They call her Crone Laosa. Apparently she's the stuff nightmares are made of. Fairy tale evil, if you know what I mean."

Ralph looked sideways at Zane. "Like, she'll catch you and turn you into a frog until some princess kisses you?"

Zane narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Like, she'll catch you and turn you into a cockroach until some lunch lady squashes you with her heel."

"I see," Ralph nodded wisely. "So, stay out of the lower levels."

As James moved through the rest of the day in his plain black blazer and tie, he couldn't help feeling noticeably colourless amidst all the other students' uniforms. He hoped that tonight's pledge dare would turn out all right so that by the next day, he could begin wearing Zombie yellow and finally fit in.

When his afternoon free period came, James found himself pleasantly distracted from his stroll to the library by the sight of his dad walking along in the sunlight, accompanied by Merlin and Denniston Dolohov. James shouldered his backpack and ran to catch up to the group as they paced along the mall, led by Chancellor Franklyn.

"Of course, with the campus moving about in time as it does," Franklyn was saying, "Alma Aleron functionally occupies a temporal fluxstream that would otherwise be used for storing our chronological history..."

James fell in step next to his father, who glanced down at him, blinked in surprise, and then smiled. Without a word, he rested his hand on his son's shoulder as they walked together.

"In summary," Franklyn went on, not noticing James' arrival, "with our history displaced by our curious use of time, we have been pressed to store our chronological timeline in another, more conventional space. The result is here before us, in the guise of the Official Alma Aleron Hall of Historical Archives."

Franklyn stopped and beamed up at the imposing stone block building that loomed before them. It was shaped like a squat cylinder, with pillars running all around its circumference and a set of enormous, iron-framed doors set into the deep portico.

"Ah, I see young Mr. Potter has joined us," Franklyn said, noticing James and smiling indulgently. "You'll come inside with us, of course, although you might find it a wee bit chilly. The Archive requires strict temperature control in order to preserve its more delicate artifacts. Shall we?" He gestured up the broad stairway, and followed as the group climbed into the building's shadow.

"How is school treating you so far, James?" Merlin asked as they ascended the stairs.

"Good, mostly," James replied.

"I have something to give you before my departure tomorrow evening," Merlin announced somewhat abruptly, keeping his voice low. "I suspect it will ease your adjustment to your new environs. Come and find me tomorrow before sunset."

James peered up at the big wizard curiously and nodded.

Franklyn approached a smaller door set into the base of one of the enormous iron-barred doors and waved his wand at it. There was a click and the door swung slowly open of its own accord.

"Of course, the main research area is always open to all students and faculty," Franklyn announced, leading the others through the dark doorway. "One must only wave their wand before the door to identify themselves. Once inside, the entire history of the school, and, alas, the United States itself, can be illuminated and studied in great detail. If, that is, one is able to produce the proper artifact. The Archive can be rather daunting to the uninitiated."

After a short dark hallway, James found himself led into a round room with blank stone walls. The vaulted ceiling was studded with dozens of tiny windows, fogged with age, reducing the light of the room to a dull, milky glow, virtually shadowless. Franklyn's voice echoed as he moved into the light, toward the room's only dominant feature.

"This is the brain of the Archive," he said, touching the stone pedestal that stood in the center of the room. "The Disrecorder. With its help, we may revisit any of the events represented by the Archive's prodigious collection of artifacts. Quite simple, really, and elegantly effective."

"The Disrecorder," Denniston Dolohov said, as if tasting the word. "Something that unravels a recording of some kind? Might I inquire how it works?"

"You very well might," Franklyn answered with a smile. "Many have. Interestingly enough, no one truly knows. The Disrecorder is one of the Archive's two fantastical ancient relics that have come to us through the mists of the ages, with origins wholly unknown. Theodore Jackson, who most of you have already met, has studied the phenomenon at length and has developed his own theories, although I admit that my understanding of them is imperfect at best. To be honest, I was hoping that *you* might be able to provide some insight into the mystery, Headmaster Ambrosius."

James glanced at Franklyn, and then at Merlin, who stood off to the side, his arms folded over his chest. It made sense that Merlin might, in fact, know something about the ancient object when one remembered that Merlin himself was, technically, over a millennium old.

"I remember talk of such things in the time from which I have come," Merlin admitted. "Deruwid Magic, it was called, and I regret to say that it was practiced only by the most secret and bent of magical societies. Ugly and vile in their dark hearts, bloodthirsty to the core, and yet powerful. The Deruwid practitioners posited that everything—from sound waves, to exhaled breaths, to magical afterglow—made tiny infinitesimal marks on the surface of the earth, a sort of code, waiting to be deciphered. In my early days, I visited these dark ones, and observed them. At that time, they sought the means to observe and read these marks—these *recordings*, as they viewed them," Merlin said, nodding toward Harry. "For they believed that if all of history could be read and distilled, then all futures could be perfectly predicted. These were wizards who desired power above all else, and they firmly believed in one thing: that he who controls the future controls all of the earth and those within it. I have learned, in fact, that this is an idea that has its adherents still today."

James realized that Merlin was staring rather pointedly at Franklyn. Franklyn noticed it as well.

"Indeed," he said a little weakly. "As with all wicked ideas, they crop up in every age, only by different names. Fortunately, the idea you speak of has fallen from favour and been disproven in this age just as effectively as it was in the age of your Deruwids."

"Out of favour it may be," Merlin said slowly. "But disproven?"

"I think I've heard of this," Harry commented, frowning slightly. "It's known as the Wizarding Grand Unification Theory, yes? Popular a century or so ago, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes, yes," Franklyn agreed with a wave of his hand. "Along with phrenology, vivisection, and the Fountain of Pleasing Breath. And all equally debunked in the modern era. But I thank you for your, er, enlightenment, Headmaster."

"How, might I ask," Denniston Dolohov said, putting on his spectacles, "was this theory debunked?"

"Ah," Franklyn answered more comfortably. "It's quite obvious, really. The Disrecorder, if indeed it is a relic from the age of the Deruwids, fails quite soundly when presented with any average object. Observe."

With that, Franklyn dug in one of his vest pockets and produced two coins, which he held up for those watching.

"This coin here," he announced, regarding the first small golden shape in his fingers, "is a standard American Drummel, or half-note. Worth a little less than five Knuts by your measure. I will now place it into the bowl of the Disrecorder. Perhaps we will learn in whose pockets it rode before it found its way into mine, yes?"

With a clink, Franklyn dropped the coin into the concave top of the stone pedestal. James watched with interest. There was silence for several seconds as everyone waited.

"Hmm," Franklyn frowned. "Nothing. And this is to be expected. You see, the Disrecorder only deciphers the imprints of an artifact that has been especially charmed to receive the input of its surroundings. Which bring us, as it were, to Exhibit B."

Franklyn pocketed the half-note and held up another, decidedly larger coin. It glittered faintly silver despite a layer of dark tarnish.

"*This* coin, worth a standard note, or Jack, you may be interested to know, was carried in the pocket of Sir Percival Pepperpock, one of the original founders of this school, upon the date of its groundbreaking. The coin was especially charmed on that day, thus preserving the details of the event for us in perpetuity. Observe."

Franklyn dropped the coin onto the bowl of the Disrecorder.

"Do you have the shovel?" a voice asked loudly in James' ear. He spun around and found himself staring up into the face of a large, very fat man wearing a vest and a short cloak with a high collar. He was smiling and red-faced, his forehead beaded with sweat. A man next to him handed him a small spade. James glanced around, wide-eyed. The walls and ceiling of the Archive chamber were still visible, but only faintly. Harry, Denniston Dolohov, Merlin, and Franklyn appeared to be

standing in a grassy field, glowing with sunshine and dotted with butterflies. Other figures stood in a haphazard line, beaming and squinting in the sunlight. Some of the figures, James was interested to see, were dwarves. With their knobby heads, sausage-like bodies, and vaguely porcine faces, James thought that each one looked a bit like a cross between a goblin and a pot-bellied pig. Wind blew, and James smelled the fresh scent of wild, woodsy spring.

A gritty, scooping sound came from behind James and he turned again, stepping aside as the fat wizard, Sir Pepperpock himself, tossed the first shovelful of earth aside, nearly onto James' shoes.

"Here, we shall erect our school," Pepperpock proclaimed happily. "And here we shall teach the dual duties of magical mastery and human respect, thus to ensure that said mastery is never used for selfish aims, but always for the good of all. Here, we shall grow our school, and from it we shall grow generations of witches and wizards who will be the shining lights of the magical world. We shall call them our children, and we shall call our school... Alma Aleron, the Mother Eagle!"

The line of observing witches and wizards applauded heartily. The dwarves applauded too, but with slightly less fervor.

"They cannot see us, of course," Franklyn called over the sound of the applause, "but it is rather hard to remember so with a recording as well-maintained as this. The artifact has held up remarkably well, being in the guise of a coin. Not all artifacts are quite as sturdy, unfortunately, but we do what we can to maintain them as well as possible."

James turned back to the Chancellor in time to see him scoop the coin from the bowl of the Disrecorder. The grassy hilltop and the happy centuries-old witches and wizards vanished instantly.

"So," Franklyn said proudly, pocketing the coin, "simple as can be. Any event can be recorded for future witness and study merely by converting any object at hand into a magical receiver. The object then becomes one of our many artifacts and goes into the Archive's collection."

"Just like Ted's new Extendable Ears," James said, thinking of the peppermint that Ted had enchanted to act as a receiver for the Ears. "Er, sort of."

"An apt analogy, I would say," Merlin nodded, smiling crookedly.

"Marvelous!" Dolohov proclaimed happily. "And where is this collection of artifacts?"

"Why right here, of course," Franklyn answered, turning and walking across the empty room. "The chamber of the Disrecorder is only the top level of the Archive. The bulk of the space is used for the artifact library. Just through this door in the back."

Franklyn produced a tiny golden key, which he stuck into a keyhole in a nondescript door. Rather than turning the key, he touched it with his wand. The key glowed brightly for a moment, and then turned on its own. The door cracked open and a breath of cool air escaped, sighing mysteriously. Franklyn gripped the handle and heaved the door open.

James followed his father into the space beyond and shivered. It was, indeed, quite cold. The temperature, however, was forgotten immediately as James got his first glimpse of the space. It was monstrous, far larger than the exterior of the Archive could account for. Tall wooden shelves ranged around the space along curved walls that met in the dim distance, some three hundred feet

across a vast, deep chasm. Thousands of artifacts rested on the shelves, in the form of books, jars, dishes, shoes, spectacles, wands, globes, stuffed animals, tools, hats, and innumerable other objects. Larger shelves held chairs, beds, even a very old car that James recognized as a Ford Model T. Every object bore a tiny white tag, apparently cataloging the contents of the event recorded within it.

Slowly, the group walked toward a low brass railing that ran around the huge opening in the floor. As James neared it, he saw that a stairway led down into the space, curving along the inside of the chasm. The stairs appeared to lead to another, lower floor, equally filled with shelves of artifacts. When James finally reached the railing and peered down, he saw that there were more floors below that, descending into the bowels of the earth in a dizzying spiral. On the opposite side of the chasm, an ornate, brass-framed elevator hung, its shaft descending deep into the floors below.

"There must be millions of artifacts here," Harry breathed. "It's overwhelming."

Franklyn nodded. "Quite so. We have a staff of students whose sole job is maintaining the catalog, updating and cleaning the artifacts as needed. Our Archival custodian, Mr. Hadley Henredon, lives here year round, guarding the artifacts and overseeing their preservation."

"What, Chancellor, is that object at the very bottom?" Merlin asked, leaning slightly over the railing with his eyes narrowed.

"Ah, that," Franklyn nodded. He peered over the railing himself, and James followed suit. In the darkness at the base of the chasm, a large object flashed and glimmered with purple light. It appeared to be spinning, but in a complicated, unpredictable fashion, as if it was made out of a dozen golden leaves and prisms, all revolving independently around some blindingly bright core.

"If the Disrecorder can be called the brain of the Archive," Franklyn said soberly, "then that down there... is its heart and soul."

Dolohov adjusted his spectacles and blinked down at the distant gold and purple blur. "Is it another artifact?"

"Not exactly," Franklyn answered. "It is, in fact, a very ancient form of distinctly American magic. None of us knows how it works or even *why* it works. We only know what it does and that it is dreadfully, devastatingly important."

"American magic," Harry said, glancing aside at the Chancellor. "It can't be all that old then, can it?"

"You misunderstand me," Franklyn said gravely. "America is indeed an old, old land. Much older than the government that now occupies it. It was here before the first settlers arrived at Plymouth Rock. It was here when this land's original inhabitants roamed the prairies and woodlands, living in teepees and hunting the buffalo that roamed in herds many miles long. America is a strange and ancient place although it was not always known by that name. We call it the great melting pot, but its attractions have been evident since long before our arrival here."

"Many other peoples and cultures visited this land in the ages of its existence, many of them magical, many of them long forgotten in the eons since. That object down there, the one encased in our best magical protections and guardian charms... was left by one of those visiting magical

peoples. Our best guesses tell us that it was the ancient Persians or Babylonians, who were among the first magical communities to ply the oceans. Perhaps they left it here, on the prairies of this wide open land, quite by accident. Then again, perhaps they abandoned it deliberately, either because they didn't need it anymore or, more likely, because they feared it, feared the dangers of this thing that their vast magical arts had wrought. We discovered it, and preserve it, but we did not create it. And we most certainly do not control it."

"Every magical society has its mysterious treasures," Harry commented. "I've been inside the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic, so I've seen many of our own. This object of yours I think I may have heard of, although I understand that its existence is kept secret from the general public. Is this so?"

"For their good, as well as its own," Franklyn nodded.

"So what is it?" Merlin asked once more. James looked up at him, and saw the purple flash of the object even this far up playing on the Headmaster's stern features.

"It is the ultimate record of all things," Franklyn said simply. "It is our history, and by that, I do not mean the history of Alma Aleron or the city of Philadelphia or even the entire United States. It is a record of all things that have ever been in this universe, from the very dawn of time. It is History, recorded in its entirety exactly as it happens, with magic so ancient and delicate that none dare to touch it. Only a very few of us have ever seen it with our naked eyes, and that only happens once a century, when we check it just to make sure it is still working."

Dolohov cleared his throat. In a small voice, he asked, "What does it look like?"

Franklyn peered down at the flickering glow and smiled slightly. He shook his head slowly as he said, "Friends, I don't think you'd believe me if I told you. It is so simple, so basic, that you would find it silly. And yet I think it is anything but."

"So what happens," Harry asked seriously, "if it stops working?"

"Why, none of us knows for sure, my dear Mr. Potter," Franklyn replied, looking slightly startled. "But I have the strongest suspicion that life—that is, everything we know and ever will know, the totality of existence—is inextricably connected to the object stored in the bowels of this very Archive. I think that if *it* stopped working... so would everything else."

Merlin frowned doubtfully. "I have known my share of very powerful magical objects," he said in a low voice. "And they all make their marks on the fabric of existence. I have never heard tell of a single magical object that bears the fabric of existence within itself. Are you quite sure of your theories about this object, Chancellor?"

"Alas," Franklyn answered, chuckling wearily. "No. We know very little, in fact. Theories are as myriad as they are improvable. We only know what the object does. We do not know why, or how, or, in fact, what would happen if it were to stop."

"In that case," Merlin said, smiling at the Chancellor, "your prudence is the most obvious and respectable choice. I am glad to know that such mysterious magic is in the hands of those so very aware of its potential gravity. What do you call it?"

Franklyn sighed and looked back down, through the depths of the artifact laden floors, to the flashing purple and gold glow far below.

With a relatively anticlimactic sniff, he answered, "We call it the Vault of Destinies."



After dinner that evening, James, Zane, and Ralph ran back to the common dorm, cutting across the lawns and weaving through the shadows of the huge elms and chestnuts. Inside, they stripped off their blazers and stowed them in the top floor room that still housed the boys' trunks. When they finally made their way back downstairs and out the rear door of the common dorm, the lowering sun had painted the sky a fierce tangerine, fading to navy blue at its zenith.

"There," Zane nodded, pointing.

The boys angled toward a line of battered metal trash cans ranged along the back wall. A drift of elm leaves lay like snow around the trash cans, carpeting their lids, but the yellow 'Z' on the can in the middle was immediately visible. James drew a breath, held it, and then lifted the lid from the marked can.

"What is it?" Ralph frowned, peering in.

"Oh man," Zane grinned. "Oh buddy. You got the granddaddy of all pledge dares. Either Warrington thinks you two are bonafide Zombies or he hates your guts."

James reached into the can and retrieved a handful of cloth. It was thick, comprised of black and yellow fabrics all sewn together in a neat pattern. There seemed to be acres of it.

"It's a flag," Ralph said, grabbing a handful and helping James pull it out of the can.

"It's the Hermes House flag," Zane said reverently. "See? It's got the Zombie crest on it, the yellow and black shield bearing the skull with crossed out eyes. Do you know what this means?"

James looked from the enormous flag in his hands to Ralph to Zane. He shook his head, not particularly liking where this was going.

"It's an old dare, but one of the most revered. The legendary flag switch. I hear that it hasn't been done by any house in years. That means the school administration's probably going to be on

the lookout for it. There may be boundary charms, guard hexes, even lookouts. Oh man, it's going to be such a blast! I can't believe I'm not allowed to come along!"

James wanted to throttle the blonde boy, but his hands were too full of flag. "What is it, you big dope? Tell us, already!"

Zane grinned and helped grab the rest of the flag out of the trash can. He wadded the mass of fabric, stuffed it into Ralph and James' arms, and then led them around the building. When they stood in front, overlooking the fountain with the gargoyle birdbath, he put an arm around James' shoulder. With his free hand he pointed across campus. "See that? Up there over the trees, on top of Administration Hall?"

"What?" Ralph asked, squinting in the twilight. "The clock tower?"

"Higher," Zane prodded, grinning even wider.

James pushed up on tiptoes to see over the trees. "Er, the belfry?"

"Higher," Zane encouraged.

James looked higher. His eyes widened and he began to shake his head slowly. "No. No way."

"The flag?" Ralph said, turning to look at Zane. "Way up on the top? That's got to be two hundred feet up! You can't be serious!"

"Two hundred and thirty-three at the point. Don't worry," Zane soothed, but his eager grin had quite the opposite effect. "There's a fire escape on the back of the Hall that takes you all the way to the bell tower. From there, there's a spiral staircase up to the belfry and a ladder up to the belfry roof. Piece of cake! Except for the bats, of course, but they're no match for a committed Zombie."

"You want us to switch this flag," James said, hefting the mound of thick fabric in his arms, "with that flag way up there?"

"Well, switching the flags is only the first half of the challenge. That flag up there is the university's original stars and stripes, 'Old Betsy'. You can't just hide her under your bed in the common dorm or anything, unless you want a posse from Werewolf House to hunt you down and clobber you ten ways from Sunday. You have to run Old Betsy up the Zombie House flagpole. Later tomorrow afternoon, we'll turn Old Betsy back in at the Administration Hall and get an honorary punishment. You'll probably just get a day's suspension."

"Wait," Ralph said, frowning. "If we succeed in this dare, we get in trouble with the school?"

"You can't think of it that way," Zane said, clapping Ralph on the shoulder. "It's a pledge dare. A day's suspension is like a badge of honor. Think of it as a paid vacation."

James sighed. "All right then. We'll do it. But after this, it's all over, right? We'll be Zombies, officially?"

"You pull this off," Zane said heartily, "and we may make you both House Presidents for a day."

James nodded grimly. A minute later, the three carried the Zombie flag up to the dorm room and hid it in the closet. Chasing each other, they crossed the campus again, heading for the theater and Professor Longbottom's assembly.



9. THE ARCHIVE ATTACK

"James!" his mum cried when she met him in front of the campus theater. "Oh, you look so handsome in your uniform. Just look at you!"

"Mum!" James hissed, pushing her hand away as she attempted to mat down his hair. "Quit it! You're embarrassing me in front of the Zombies!"

"Oh yes, your new house. That reminds me, have you seen Albus?" she asked, peering around the crowd that milled near the theater entrance.

"Just look for the blokes with the dark grey uniforms and the burgundy ties," James answered. "Albus will probably be carrying them on his shoulders."

"So how is the sorting tradition coming along, then?" Denniston Dolohov asked, smiling and nodding proudly at his son.

"Ask us again tomorrow morning," Ralph sighed.

Zane beamed. "They're doing great, everybody. Not as well as I did, of course, but that's a pretty high bar to reach. Tomorrow, they'll be Zombies all official-like. You wait and see."

James saw the curious look in his mother's eye and changed the subject as quickly as he could. "Where's Dad and Headmaster Merlin anyway?"

"They're both up front with Neville," Ginny sighed as they pushed through the theater doors, entering the main lobby. "He's a bit nervous, after all. They're giving him a spot of moral support."

"Hi Petra!" Zane called, waving. James turned around and saw her entering behind them, smiling warmly. The three boys drifted toward her.

"Where's Izzy?" Ralph asked, peering around.

"She's staying with Molly and Lily tonight. I hear that the assembly might run rather long, so Audrey's watching both of them at the flat downtown. How are you both settling in?"

"Fine," James answered. "It's way different here, but not so different that it doesn't make its own weird sense."

"They have *six* houses," Ralph said, shaking his head. "Crazy, if you ask me. What about you, Petra?"

"I spent most of the day applying for jobs here on campus," Petra sighed wearily. "I don't need much money, after all. Even teacher's assistants get free room and board, and can even take graduate level classes for no charge. Izzy can stay here with me and go to the little faculty grade school on campus. I might go for my T.O.A.D. certification and become a professor myself. *If* I can get in somewhere, that is."

"Who wouldn't hire you?" James asked as the four made their way into the seating area. "You're a genius no matter how you look at it! Why, they'd be a bunch of sodding blockheads not to see that." He stopped himself and reddened, suddenly fearing that he might be making his point a little too enthusiastically.

"Thanks James," Petra replied. "Here's hoping. I'll probably know by the end of the week. The truth is I'm feeling pretty confident. The Headmaster put in a good word for me with some of the department heads."

"He did?" James asked, wide-eyed.

"You seem surprised," Petra said, looking at him a bit quizzically.

"Well," James said, looking away, "no. Er, of course not. I mean, Merlin, he's got a lot of pull, doesn't he?"

Petra shrugged. "He's Merlinus Ambrosius."

The four made their way into a row near the front, squeezing past a gaggle of Pixie House girls in pink sweaters, who peered narrowly up at James and Ralph's plain black ties.

"Pledges," one of the girls muttered. "They should have their own seating section in the back."

"Oh wait," another of the girls said, raising a hand to her lips in mock surprise, "they do!"

"We know the professor," James said loudly. "The one who's giving the speech? That bloke? Yeah, we came with him."

"I wouldn't have guessed," the first girl responded. "Your accent didn't give you away at *all*."

Ralph peered sideways at the girls as he sat down. "We don't have accents," he muttered. "They do. Daft Americans."

"Shh," Petra shushed, smiling. "We don't want to make an international scene."

"There's Lucy," James said, turning around in his seat. "And Albus. They're sitting with Mum and Uncle Percy and Mr. Dolohov, a few rows back."

"So how's that whole Dolohov thing working out for you anyway, Ralph?" Zane asked, nudging the larger boy. "I see you've stuck with the Deedle. Is that causing you any grief?"

Ralph shrugged. "I like the Deedle. I mean, I know it's not quite as dashing-sounding as Dolohov, but I just can't do it. I mean, you know the history of that family. I have a hard enough time living it down without taking the name."

"Yeah," Zane nodded. "I heard about what happened with you and Ted last year. I'm guessing he got most of that out of his system though."

"At least if he didn't," James added thoughtfully, "there's a whole ocean between him and Ralph now. And I hear werewolves don't much like the water."

"He's not a true werewolf," Ralph said, shaking his head. "He's a Metamorphmagus with certain wolfish tendencies, but still, yeah, I'm not too upset about having an ocean between us."

Zane sighed and settled back into his seat. "I bet trying to live with two names is tough, either way. I don't envy you, Ralphinator. Hey, that makes *three* names you've got!"

"You're the only person that calls me *that* one," Ralph said, rolling his eyes.

Next to James, Petra remained silent. Ralph, James remembered, was not the only person living with two names. Petra had changed her own name in the wake of the ordeal at her grandfather's farm, deciding to call herself, simply, Morgan. She hadn't insisted that everyone change how they refer to her, but James had a sneaky feeling that in her heart, she couldn't shake her new name any more than Ralph could shake the name Dolohov. James didn't know what it all meant, but it worried him a little.

It was almost like Petra had two different personalities. One was the Petra that he had known for the past couple of years, the happy girl and bright student. The other, however, Morgan, did eerily powerful magic without the aid of a wand and very well might have killed someone. James

couldn't help wondering if, just perhaps, those two sides of Petra's personality were at war with each other. More importantly, which side, if any, was most influenced by that last haunting shred of Voldemort's lost soul? And how might it influence Petra's internal struggle?

James' worried thoughts were interrupted at that point as a figure emerged onto the brightly lit stage before them. The house lights went dim all around and the crowd fell gradually silent.

"Ladies and gentleman, students, faculty, and visiting friends from the magical community," the man said, smiling. He was tall and lean, with shiny black hair framing his ruddy face. "Welcome. My name is Professor John Sanuye, and I am the Head of the Flora Department here at Alma Aleron. I am pleased to say that we have procured one of the world's foremost experts on magical botany, a man whose fame precedes him, even among those who have not read his very interesting treatise on the thousand and one uses of common marsh ferns and mosses. Please welcome for tonight's discussion Mr. Neville Longbottom."

Sanuye applauded and beamed as Neville stood from his seat in the front row. Before climbing the stairs to the podium, he turned and smiled sheepishly back at the crowd. It was not a large theater, but James was quite surprised to see that it was very full, with students crammed into the back on folding chairs, and even standing in the entryway. They applauded, but there were very few smiles in the room.

Neville climbed the stairs and produced a small stack of notes from the pocket of his robes. He cleared his throat and peered out over the podium, smiling nervously. James felt a pang of discomfort for the professor. Neville was clearly terrified of speaking before such a large audience.

"Ahem," he said, clearing his throat again. "Thank you all for coming. I am, er, quite honored and, frankly, surprised by the turnout. In the country from which I come, herbology is not a subject that commands such, er, *enthusiastic* adherents."

A murmur of laughter rippled over the room, taking Neville by surprise. He blinked and smiled before going on. "I've, er, come tonight prepared to speak on some of the newer avenues of magical botanical research, which are, er, advancing our understanding of such studies as potion-making, medicine, wand-creation, and even wizarding philosophy and ethics."

Neville grew more confident as he spoke and James found himself growing quickly bored. As much as he liked Professor Longbottom, he always found his classes exceedingly, almost painfully dull. Tonight's speech was no different except for the fact that James didn't need to pay attention for the sake of a grade. His thoughts began to wander, as did his eye. The rest of the audience watched Neville with varying degrees of alert interest, polite boredom, and, in a few cases, frowning concentration. In the front row, James was surprised to see his dad leaning aside and whispering to a man that James didn't know. The man smiled as Harry whispered to him, and then laughed silently, his eyes twinkling. Strangely enough, the two seemed to be very familiar with each other, as if they were long lost friends. James made a mental note to ask his father about the man later.

Eventually, Neville produced a series of photographs, which he temporarily enlarged with *Engorgio* spells. The photographs were magical of course, but since they were mostly of plants, they didn't move. The only interesting one was of a strange tree with long tentacle-like branches tipped

with snapping jaws, rather like large Venus Flytraps. The tree, which Neville called a Moroccan Fanged Viperthwip, writhed and snapped its many jaws in the photo, commanding a gasp from some of the observers in the front rows. Near the end of the speech, Neville produced a small plant of his own, withdrawing it from his robes like a long green snake. The root-ball was tiny, about the size of a walnut, clutching a neat spoonful of earth. Neville set the plant onto the end of the podium, where it slowly righted itself and reached toward the lights overhead.

"This, ladies and gentlemen, is my crowning achievement," Neville said proudly. "The mythical and elusive Bamboozle tree. According to legend, it is able to adopt the appearance and even the alchemical characteristics of virtually any plant to which it is exposed, disguising itself in avoidance of being weeded out. Allow me to illustrate."

Neville used his wand to levitate one of his many photos, and then gave it a flick, enlarging it.

"Devil's Snare," he said, nodding toward the photo. There was a slight rustling on the podium as the Bamboozle shifted. Its roots spread out and grew thick and brown while its few leaves multiplied and turned into snaking vines. Within moments, the Bamboozle had transfigured itself into the unmistakable shape of a small Devil's Snare, much like the one in the enlarged photograph. The crowd murmured with interest.

"Spynuswort," Neville said proudly, flicking his wand again and producing another photograph, this one showing a tall, thin plant with reddish patterned leaves. The Bamboozle changed again. Its vines curled into balls and then budded leaves, perfectly replicating those shown in the photo.

"Larcenous Ligulous," Neville smiled, changing the photo once more. Now, the Bamboozle flattened and spread out, covering the top of the podium with writhing green creepers. The crowd muttered and stirred all around.

"And lest we forget," Neville said, removing a ring from his finger and holding it up to the light, "the most remarkable characteristic of the Bamboozle: its ability to emulate any chosen plant's characteristic tendencies and magical make-up. This, more than anything, is what makes it so potentially invaluable to the wizarding world."

The Bamboozle sensed the glitter of Neville's upheld ring. Slowly, it lifted a trio of creepers, which rose toward the ring, as if sniffing at it. They curled around it hungrily and pried it from Neville's hand, just as a Larcenous Ligulous plant would. The audience laughed and applauded lightly.

"If I were to snip a root sample from the Bamboozle in its current state and submit it to any herbological laboratory, it would take much testing to prove that it was not, in fact, a true Larcenous Ligulous. If we are able to successfully breed and propagate the Bamboozle, it may significantly improve the availability of some of the wizarding world's rarest and most essential botanical resources, and even allow us to recreate many that have ceased to exist entirely."

The crowd responded again, led by the very enthusiastic applause of Professor Sanuye in the front row. Harry clapped as well and whistled loudly. The man next to him joined in, cupping his hands to his mouth. “Go Neville!” he called, nodding encouragement.

“And that pretty much concludes my presentation,” Neville said, smiling with obvious relief. He flicked his wand once more, shrinking the photos back to their normal size and catching them as they dropped out of the air. On the podium, the Bamboozle tree began to slowly revert to its original state. “Professor Sanuye has suggested that we open the floor to any comments or questions from the audience, which I am happy to do. So, does anyone have anything they’d like to ask about?”

James looked around, surprised to see a raft of hands suddenly shoot up all around. Neville seemed surprised as well. He blinked and took a half step back from the podium. With a shrug and a smile, he pointed to a hand in the front row. “You then. Speak up for us all to hear.”

“Greetings, Professor,” one of the Pixie students said, standing up and smiling. “Thank you for coming to speak to us. My question has less to do with herbology than it does with history, if you’ll indulge me.”

Neville blinked again. James glanced at the Pixie student. She was older, quite possibly one of the college students. She met Neville’s gaze openly, still smiling, and James couldn’t help thinking that it was an uncomfortably familiar expression. It was, in fact, the same sort of expression Tabitha Corsica had so often worn when she was about to say something infuriatingly confrontational.

“History isn’t really my area of expertise,” Neville said slowly, but the girl spoke up before he could continue.

“I recognize that herbology is your passion, which means you obviously have a great love for all growing things. I wonder if that love extends to the animal kingdom as well? I understand that you are in the habit of beheading snakes. Would you care to elaborate?”

There was a sort of collective low whistle from the crowd, and then a ripple of derisive laughter. James glanced around with sudden anger and dismay, and then looked back up at the podium. Neville’s face had gone red, but his mouth had tightened into a hard line.

“Next question,” he stated flatly, raising his gaze over the crowd. Hands shot into the air again.

“Yes, Professor,” another student asked from the back. James turned around and saw that it was a member of Igor House, wearing the characteristic acid green tie. His face was round and waxy in the lamplight near the doors. “I’m sorry, my question isn’t really flora-related either. Did you know, when you rallied your classmates against the revolutionaries of your time, that you were siding with the existing totalitarian regime or were you just duped by the propaganda of the day into thinking that you were on the side of right?”

Neville opened his mouth in shock as the crowd babbled noisily, nodding in agreement and shouting for him to answer. James looked around again, meeting Zane and Ralph’s eyes. It was like the first Hogwarts all-school debate again, only worse, because the entire crowd seemed to be on the

same side. Now James understood why the lecture had been so well-attended. Neville, after all, was nearly as famous as Harry Potter, and not just for his textbooks on herbology.

"I was afraid something like this would happen," Zane said, leaning toward James. "Like I told you, the Progressive Element types are all over the place here. There are even some in the faculty."

Ralph looked around uneasily. "Won't the professors put a stop to it?"

"That's not really the way things work around here," Zane replied. "Neville's expected to answer the questions, no matter what. I wouldn't be surprised if this wasn't part of why he was asked to speak."

"If that's true, it's beastly," Petra said with low conviction.

At the podium, Neville stood stoically, his brow lowered. He no longer seemed nervous. He seemed, if anything, quietly angry. He collected the Bamboozle again and deposited it carefully into a pocket of his robes.

"Are there any questions related to the subject that I was invited here to speak upon?" he asked loudly, overruling the babbling audience.

"Answer the question!" a voice behind James hollered. Others joined in, turning the phrase into a chant.

Neville glanced down toward the front row. James leaned forward and saw his dad nod slightly up at Neville. To James' amazement, Harry Potter seemed to be smiling with something like weary resignation. On Harry's left, Merlin's expression was calm and inscrutable, his arms folded almost lazily across his chest. Professor Sanuye shrugged up at Neville and shook his head regretfully. He didn't appear to like what was happening, but neither did he seem prepared to put a stop to it.

"You lot seem to be suffering under some rather unfortunate misapprehensions about history," Neville finally said, holding his wand to his throat and amplifying his voice. The raucous crowd quieted, but not completely. Neville went on, lowering his wand again. "Now, if you insist upon asking questions unrelated to my subject of expertise, I shall apparently have to answer them, lest I leave you with the impression that I am unable to do so. But you will ask your questions with respect, and not use the opportunity to merely quote popular propaganda for the amusement of your fellows. Is anyone willing to abide by these stipulations?"

Less hands went up now. Neville frowned and nodded at a student near James, who stood up.

"Professor," the young man said, and James saw that he was a college-level student and a member of Vampire House, "as a scholar, surely you'd agree that your work with flora is intended for the benefit of all mankind. Is that true?"

Neville narrowed his eyes slightly. "I live in the hope that such is the case, young man."

"Then why, sir, do you and others like you insist on hoarding your discoveries for the magical community, refusing even to consider sharing them with the Muggle world?"

The crowd erupted again, shouting scornfully, many climbing to their feet.

“Questions... are... permitted!” a voice bellowed from the front row, and James was relieved to see that it was Professor Sanuye, his eyes dark and severe. The crowd quieted again almost instantly and the professor went on in a measured voice. “But disrespect is *not*. You have heard the terms of our esteemed guest and they are quite reasonable. It is the policy of this school to welcome discourse, but not discord. Allow Professor Longbottom to answer your questions or do not ask them. Understood?”

The crowd muttered to itself, obviously agitated, but subdued for the moment. On the stage, Neville cleared his throat again.

“A good question, my friend,” he said slowly, raising his eyebrows. “One that any thinking witch and wizard should ask themselves. The answer, however, is equally important. Granted, we in the magical community could offer many advancements and medicines to the Muggle world. The fact of the matter is that we do so even now. Your own Chancellor has had a hand in the groundbreaking Inter-Magical Knowledge Exchange Act, which allows inertly magical lifesaving discoveries to be shared with the Muggle world secretly, but effectively. There are charities and coalitions who have been granted special privilege to act secretly in the Muggle world, performing acts of magical intervention in deserving situations. I suspect that you are aware of these things, however, so I can only assume that what you truly mean by your question is this: why do we not simply throw the doors of the magical world wide open to the Muggle community, revealing ourselves fully and completely? Is this so?”

The young man shuffled his feet slightly and glanced around at the rest of the audience. “Um. Yes, I think that is exactly right. The prejudiced policies of magical governments against the Muggle world should be overthrown. Total disclosure is the only option that will result in real freedom for all of humanity...”

“Yes, yes,” Neville nodded. “I’ve seen the posters as well. Let us assume that we do exactly as you propose. The magical world comes out of hiding and reveals itself completely to the Muggle world. What do you expect will happen?”

“Well,” the young man mumbled, looking around again, apparently wishing someone else would come to his aid. The rest of the audience merely watched with bright-eyed interest. “Well, then there would be equality. We could help the Muggles. We could share everything we know with them, and help them in lots of ways. I mean, we’re witches and wizards. We’ve got magic on our side.”

“Ahh!” Neville said, leaning forward on the podium. “We could help them indeed. But what if they didn’t *wish* to be helped? What if certain members of the magical community desired to get involved in Muggle affairs, such as business, medicine, even government, and the Muggles didn’t wish them to?”

“Then we’d help them to understand that we just want to help them!” the student replied, rallying. “They wouldn’t know what was best for them, after all.”

Neville nodded. “So we’d help them against their will?”

"If we had to," the young man answered, raising his chin.

"Indeed," Neville concurred. "Many would do exactly that. Certain witches and wizards would inculcate themselves into the Muggle ruling class, all under the guise of helping them. Some of us—not you, of course, my friend, but *some*—would be happy to resort to force. They'd use whatever magic helped them in the cause, even the Imperius Curse. Others, however, would be less... scrupulous. Believe it or not, my friends, there are witches and wizards among us who might actually wish to rule the Muggles merely for the sake of power. Such people are kept in check now by the existence of the international laws of secrecy. But what will you do with these witches and wizards if those laws are abolished? Will you protect the Muggles from them? How? What will keep wicked witches and wizards from using whatever means they wish to achieve power over the Muggles?"

The young man seemed to know that he was losing the moral high ground. He shuffled his feet some more and refused to look directly at Neville. "That's just scaremongering. That's what you people always do."

"Scaring people with fictitious threats is scaremongering," Neville said kindly. "Warning people about threats that are quite real—threats that history teaches us are very nearly a certainty given the right conditions—is an act of kindness and compassion. The history of Muggle-magical interaction is rife with conflict. Both sides are equally guilty, admittedly, but the reality remains the same. We stay in hiding, quite simply, because the good that could come from our incorporation into the Muggle world is decidedly less than the evil that would inevitably result. In a perfect world, my friend, your theories would be quite honorable. Alas, this is not a perfect world."

"Excuses and lies!" the student cried out suddenly, and the crowd stirred around him, murmuring agreement. "You hate the Muggles, so you wish to keep them ignorant of us, and all we could do for them. There *aren't* any supreme evil witches and wizards bent on taking over the world. That's a lie that you people have made up just to keep the rest of the magical world in line. The Muggles would welcome us, and you know it. And even if they didn't..." The young man faltered suddenly, realizing what he was about to say.

Neville didn't blink, but stared at the man solemnly, gripping the podium before him. "Even if they didn't...", he said, finishing the student's thought, "we'd have magic on our side. Right?"

The young man sat down suddenly and the crowd babbled again, growing noisy and tense. Professor Sanuye climbed to the stage and moved alongside Neville. "That will conclude tonight's lecture," he called sternly. "Students, please make your way back to your dormitories, thank you. It is rather late, and at least some of you have class with me in the morning. I will frown upon any absences due to your staying out too late the night before. Good evening, and thank you for coming." At that point, Sanuye turned to Neville, reaching to shake his hand. The two talked, their heads close together.

"What a complete load of yax fodder," a girl behind James muttered angrily. "But what do you expect?"

"Come on," Zane sighed, shaking his head. "The sooner we get out of here, the better. Let's go grab a soda at the Kite and Key."

James followed Zane and Ralph out of the crowded theater, glancing back toward the stage. His father stood in front, flanked by Merlin and Denniston Dolohov, who was laughing animatedly. None of them seemed the slightest bit perturbed by the events of the night and James could guess why. Most of them had been dealing with the allegations of the Progressive Element for years, both subtly, through articles in *the Daily Prophet*, and overtly, such as the demonstration that had occurred at Hogwarts during James' first year. They had all developed rather thick skins about such things. James had not developed such a thick skin, and he felt decidedly angry and unsettled.

As the three reached the theater doors and stepped out into the night air, James glanced around to see if Petra was planning to join them for a soda at the campus tavern. She was nowhere in sight amidst the dissipating throng, however. James lingered for a moment, looking for her without any success, and then turned and ran to catch up with his friends.



James' dreams were interrupted some hours later by a loud rapping at his dormitory room door. He started and very nearly fell out of the narrow bed. Outside the door, a faint squeaking sound came, like the screech of old hinges.

"That brass monkey gives me the royal creeps," Ralph muttered, covering his head with his pillow. "Is that its voice?"

"I think its clockworks are too old to make a voice anymore," James yawned. "It just squeaks its jaw. That must be our four a.m. wake-up call."

Ralph swung his feet out of bed. "I never thought I'd say this, but I miss my old digital alarm clock."

Five minutes later, the boys sneaked out of the front door of the common dorm, closing it quietly behind them. The night was cool and still all around, wet with dew. The fountains had stopped running for the night, and even the birdbath gargoyles seemed to be asleep. Ralph wore his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, packed with the Zombie House flag.

"Do they have campus guards, you think?" he whispered as they began to steal through the darkness.

"Better safe than sorry," James answered. "Stick close to the trees. The moonlight is too bright for us to cross the main lawns."

Ralph huffed as they ran. "This was a lot easier when we had the Invisibility Cloak."

"Hopefully this is the only time this year we'll need it. It'll be fine. Just keep up."

By the time they reached the deep shadows of Administration Hall, James' trainers were soggy with dew and both boys were panting. They leaned against the cool bricks and caught their breath before slipping between the bushes and sneaking around to the rear of the building.

"All right," James whispered, hunkering in the shadow of a tall shrubbery. "This should be a snap. I'll climb up and switch the flags. You stay down here and keep an eye on me with your wand. If I fall, you and your wand will know what to do, right?"

"Levitate you," Ralph nodded. "You want me just to see if I can levitate you right up there?"

James shook his head. "Too obvious. If I climb, I'll stay in the shadows, so there's less chance of getting caught. That moon's like a searchlight tonight. Just be ready."

"Get it over with," Ralph said sincerely, slipping the duffle bag from his shoulder and offering it to James. "My stomach's in knots already. Maybe we should have just gone for Igor House after all."

James shook his head. "No turning back now, Ralph. Don't worry, this'll all be over in a few minutes."

Ralph nodded, unconvinced but committed. James shouldered the bag and then turned toward the building. A series of narrow iron stairs and balconies clung to the rear of Administration Hall, stretching all the way up to the roof. James clambered up the first level as quietly as he could. Before long, the campus fell away beneath him, stretching out so wide that he could see the stone wall that surrounded it. Beyond the wall, the city of Philadelphia sparkled with lights, and James had time to wonder what year they were currently occupying. After only a few minutes, he reached the top level of the fire escape. He peered up at the bell tower that loomed before him. It seemed much larger this close up, each of the four bells approximately the size of a giant's head, but far less lumpy. All around the inside of the bell tower, pigeons roosted by the dozens, dozing amid messy nests. James turned around and leaned over the railing. Far below, Ralph peered up at him, his face a round white dot in the darkness. James gave a halfhearted wave, and then turned and clambered up onto the angle of the roof, reaching for the wooden railing of the bell tower.

The inside of the tower stank of pigeon guano and age. A narrow wooden walkway ran around the perimeter of the tower, overlooking the dizzyingly deep throat of the tower. James held his breath and looked around. On the other side of the bell tower was a rickety circular stairway, leading up into the rafters. James made his way toward it, trying to ignore the squeak and groan of the planks beneath his feet. As he began to climb the narrow staircase, circling its central post, a wave of vertigo overtook him. The duffle bag felt very heavy and awkward on his back as he gripped the railing. He squeezed his eyes shut until the sensation passed, and then continued onward carefully.

An unlocked trapdoor opened easily at the top of the stairs and James clambered cautiously up onto the narrow floor of the belfry. He lay there for a moment, catching his breath and hugging the floor, afraid to look up, and a subtle noise pricked his ear. Slowly, he pushed himself upright and raised his head. The raftered ceiling of the belfry was black with bats. They shuffled and squeaked faintly, watching James.

His eyes went wide and he uttered a strangled little squeak of his own, getting his feet beneath him as he hunkered on the floor. He peered around and saw the ladder on the belfry's right side. It was made of ancient painted wood, attached to the outside of the belfry beyond the low railing. Scuffling, James moved toward it. Beyond the railing, the wind switched suddenly, hooting in a nearby drainpipe. James shuddered. Finally, he leaned on the railing and reached over it, gripping the ladder. As carefully and quietly as he could, he pulled himself over the railing and clung to the ladder, which creaked ominously. Probably, it was magically fortified, as were nearly all old magical structures. Still, the ledge of roof some twenty feet below seemed horribly narrow and the drop beyond that perfectly harrowing. James tried not to look. He gritted his teeth and began to climb.

Fortunately, there was one more trapdoor above the ladder, leading to a very narrow walkway around the conical roof of the belfry. James heaved himself up onto it and leaned against the angle of the narrow roof, breathing hard. With his foot, he kicked the trapdoor shut, not wishing to fall through it by accident. Above him, the huge old American flag, Old Betsy, flapped in the breeze. Finally, James worked his way partly around the cone of the roof, knelt in its shadow on the wooden walkway, and unslung the duffle bag from his shoulder. He began to draw out the Zombie flag, careful not to let the wind catch it and carry it away.

Suddenly, shockingly, James heard a scuffle of footsteps. They were very close by, but indistinct, lost in the rush of the wind. James froze, his eyes going wide.

Zane had said that the school administration was on the lookout for students engaged in the flag switch escapade. Had they seen him? Were they climbing up to catch him in the act? There was absolutely no place for him to hide. James peered around, but he could no longer see the trapdoor around the shape of the roof. He hunkered back against the old shingles, trying to blend in with the shadows as well as he could.

The scuffling came again, stealthy and quiet. Someone was sneaking up on him, apparently, trying to catch him by surprise. With a sigh, James decided that there was nothing for it but to turn himself in. He dropped the Zombie flag into a heap on top of the duffle bag, stood up, and found himself staring into the pale, surprised face of his own brother.

"James!" Albus rasped, and James realized that his brother had his wand in his hand. "What are you doing here?"

James looked his brother up and down and made a very quick deduction in his head. He sighed. "Same as you, apparently. Where's the Werewolf flag?"

"Back behind me," Albus said, stifling a laugh. "Is that...?" he asked, pointing his wand at the wad of fabric next to James' feet. James nodded.

"You're switching the flags," James said. "Same as me. Did you know?"

"Not likely!" Albus replied in a harsh whisper. "Altaire said that no one else was going to do it this year because the heat was too high with the administration. So now what do we do?"

James didn't hear his brother's last question. Another scuffling sound came from behind him and a shadow rose into view. James saw a wand raised in a dark hand, pointing at Albus from behind.

"Al!" James cried, scrambling to produce his own wand. "Behind you!"

Albus turned, but not before the figure struck.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" a female voice barked, and a bolt of magic seared from the upraised wand. It passed over Albus' shoulder and struck James squarely in the chest. He went immediately stiff, frozen in place, and began to totter backwards.

The figure flicked her wand again and the Zombie flag at James' feet rose up like a cloth snake. It coiled around James' waist and knotted, leaving a long length behind it.

"Grab that, pledge," the female voice said briskly.

Albus scrambled and snatched at the length of flag that trailed from James' waist. A second later, the cloth went taut, catching James as he fell backwards against the old railing, breaking it.

"Ugh," Albus grunted, shifting his stance and wrapping the length of flag around his fists. "You're heavy. You know that, James? You need to lay off the Cockroach Clusters a bit."

"This is your brother?" the figure asked, and James now saw that it was the dark girl from Werewolf House, the one that had made Albus do pushups the day before.

"Sir, yes sir!" Albus answered immediately.

The girl smiled tightly at James. "Lesson number twelve from the Werewolf handbook, pledge. Let me hear it."

"He who strikes first strikes best!" Albus announced, still struggling to hold onto the length of flag. James leaned back on his heels, frozen like a statue, but dreadfully aware of the precariousness of his position. Below him was only dark space, full of wind and the shush of the chestnut trees on the Hall lawn.

"That's lesson number six," the girl said. "But still appropriate, so I'll let you off this time. Number twelve is 'all's fair in love and war...'"

"And there's nothing other than love and war!" Albus finished confidently.

"Good work, pledge," the girl nodded. "Hold on while I raise the Werewolf flag."

James' heart pounded as he watched the girl produce the flag from a camouflaged backpack. The flag was folded into a neat triangle shape, which she unfurled with a tap of her wand. A moment later, she used her wand to operate the pulleys of the flagpole, which jutted from the roof's cone. With practiced economy, she switched the flags, folded Old Betsy reverently, and secured it in her backpack.

"Operation Capture the Flag is complete, pledge," she said, straightening. "Which only leaves us to manage our prisoner of war. We have to assume he isn't alone, but Raphael has probably already secured any hostiles on the ground. Can't leave this one up here to replace the flags again once we decamp, which leaves us only one option. Lesson number three from the Werewolf handbook, pledge."

"Neutralize any potential threat!" Albus quoted immediately. Behind him, the girl knotted the long end of the Zombie flag around a length of copper drainpipe. She smiled grimly.

"You do the honors, pledge," she said. "Prove your Werewolf worthiness."

Albus glanced over his shoulder at her, and then turned back to James, his face vaguely apologetic, but only vaguely. He smiled crookedly. "Sorry, James," he said. "Lesson one in the Werewolf handbook: 'A Werewolf's gotta do what a Werewolf's gotta do.'"

James tried to shake his head, but the spell still had him perfectly frozen. Albus let go of the flag and James immediately dropped backwards, tipping over the edge of the rooftop walkway. He fell for one sickening second, and then jerked to a halt, caught by the flag that was knotted around his waist. An explosion of noise suddenly surrounded him as the shock of his fall startled the bats in the tower belfry. They squeaked and boiled into the air, their wings thrashing all around him. A moment later, the noise of the bats' departure died away and James swung gamely, turning dizzyingly on the end of his unusual tether. One of the bats perched on his head, squeaking amiably.

Nearby, he heard the diminishing tramp of footsteps on the ladder as well as the infuriating sound of smug, stifled laughter.



"You two," Warrington said after a long fuming pause, "seem to have some basic misunderstanding of how the whole flag switch dare is supposed to go down."

James slumped in the rickety chair in the attic office of Hermes House. Next to him, Ralph sighed and stared hard at the stained yellow carpet. Warrington leaned on the wobbly old desk, all four of whose legs seemed to have folded wads of paper under them.

The Zombie House office was tiny and crammed with bookshelves despite its noticeable lack of books. The shelves were, instead, heavy with unusual odds and ends, brick-a-brack, piles of unopened post, tools, amusingly shaped papier-mâché art projects, and the occasional skull, most

wearing sunglasses and plastic noses. The wooden door was covered with a nearly life-sized poster photo of Theodore Hirshall Jackson caught in a stern pose, wagging a long finger at the viewer, his dark brow lowered. Construction paper letters were tacked above the poster's head, spelling out the words 'I WANT YOU to GIVE ME A HUG AND A COOKIE'.

Warrington stood up straight and paced along a narrow path worn through the room's detritus, passing between the desk and the single round window. "The point, you see," he went on in a strained voice, stabbing his right finger at his left palm, "is to *not* make Zombie House look like a bunch of bumbling nincompoops. Anything beyond that is, frankly, gravy. Gravy!"

Warrington punched an inflatable doll made to resemble a rather ghastly clown. It bobbed on its weighted base and swung back, squeaking.

"They were Werewolves," Ralph moaned weakly. "I barely saw them before they dropped on me like a piano. They were wearing camouflage! They had bits of bushes stuck to their hats! I thought I was being attacked by some kind of weird American dryad monsters!"

"They were *Werewolves!*" Warrington hissed, rounding on the boys, his eyes wild. He struggled to compose himself and swiped a hand over his face, sighing vehemently. "Look. You're new here, so I'll give you a helpful little lesson on the intricate societal politics that define life here in the hallowed halls of the Aleron. *We hate the Werewolves.* Here endeth the lesson. Got it?"

"But they had actual members helping out the pledge, who just happened to be my brother," James rallied. "They attacked us before we had a chance to react!"

"That's how Werewolves work!" Warrington cried, exasperated. "They're Werewolves, for Zark's sake! To them, everything's a battlefield! Their one weakness is when people yank the battlefield out from under them! *That's the Zombie way!*"

Ralph raised both hands, palms up. "But what could we have done?"

"Gummy shoes!" Warrington rasped, deadpan. "Stick them to the ground like flies on flypaper! Or the Jelly-Legs Jinx, or Tickling Hexes, or even spontaneous explosive intestinal gas. You can't just face down a Werewolf, you have to embarrass them. Their insufferable pride is their ultimate weakness. Any Zombie knows that!"

"Sorry," James said miserably, "we're new to all of this. They got to us before we had a chance to respond. We'll do better next time. Give us one more chance!"

Warrington boggled at James. He spluttered, "They left you hanging by the Zombie flag from the belfry landing! The entire school saw you up there before Franklyn was able to get you down! You made us a laughingstock! Zombies *do* the laughing, pledge! Not the other way around!"

"Now whose pride is at stake?" Ralph mumbled.

"And you," Warrington said, turning to Ralph, his eyes blazing. "I'm surprised you can talk at all, after being hung up on the Hermes House flagpole for the last three hours! If you could die of wedgies, we'd be arranging your funeral right about now!"

Behind Ralph and James came the sound of stifled laughter. James turned around. Against the rear wall, in an old clawfoot chair with threadbare upholstery, sat the President of Zombie House, a small dapper man with what appeared to be, for all intents and purposes, goat's legs. He was dressed in a tailored jacket with tails, an immaculately tied yellow ascot, and a natty grey vest. Two stubby purplish horns adorned his temples. His name, James now knew, was Professor Felix Stanford Cloverhoof, and he was apparently a faun, also known, for some reason, as the Jersey Devil.

"I'm sorry," Cloverhoof said, recovering himself and assuming a serious expression. "Do continue, Mr. Warrington. You are on quite a roll."

"I'm done," Warrington said, moving back around the desk and plopping into his chair, which squeaked in protest. "With both of them."

"I'm afraid that Mr. Warrington is quite right, my friends," Cloverhoof said breezily, climbing to his hooved feet. He straightened his vest and picked a fleck of dust from his lapel. "Zombie House does have its standards, ill-defined and amorphous as they are. I quite suspect that you will be rather happier elsewhere."

"But..." James exclaimed, stammering. "But, but...!"

"I had a rather lengthy discussion about the affair with the Chancellor this morning after he... er... *extracted* the both of you from your various predicaments. I agree with his assessment entirely. There is really only one house for students with your particular... ahem... aptitudes."

"Oh no," Ralph moaned. "Not Igor House."

Cloverhoof blinked at Ralph and smiled a little crookedly. "Igor House?" he said inquisitively. "No, not quite. Come along boys. The morning is well begun and surely you have classes to attend to. Tonight, you will begin life in your new society. Surely you will fit in very nicely."

"Which house?" James asked unhappily, standing up and moving toward the door as the faun professor swung it open.

"Why, I'd have thought it was obvious," Cloverhoof replied brightly. "Frankly, I'm surprised you didn't rush there in the first place. The Chancellor has determined that you should be assigned to Bigfoot House. I'm quite certain that you will find it very... er... reassuring."

James and Ralph slumped where they stood.

From the desk behind them, Warrington grinned wickedly. "See you on the Clutch course, boys!" he announced, and chuckled humorlessly.



"I don't see what the big deal is about Bigfoot House," Lucy said, rolling her eyes. The sun was setting over the campus, painting long purple shadows over the lawns and footpaths as the students made their way back from dinner in the cafeteria.

"That's because *you* got into the house you rushed for," Ralph grumped. "You've got the blood red tie to prove it."

"Looks excellent too," Zane added.

Lucy smiled demurely. "Thank you. But the point is, you were probably never meant to be in Zombie House anyway, and if you'd ended up there, you probably would've been totally miserable."

"Hush your mouth!" Zane exclaimed, covering his ears with his hands. "That's the Zombies you're talking about!"

"And a fine bunch they are, I'm sure," Lucy soothed. "Just not for James and Ralph. Obviously it fits *you* like a suit of armor. Albeit, yellow armor, with a clown's wig on the top."

"Now you're talking," Zane nodded, mollified.

"But Bigfoot House," James moaned. "They're the *nobody* dorm."

"In that case, it fits you two perfectly," Albus said, coming up from behind.

James glanced back at his brother darkly. "When did you get here, you big turncoat?"

"At least my turncoat comes with a burgundy tie," Albus replied, brushing off his blazer and peering critically down at himself. "Pretty dashing, isn't it?"

Ralph narrowed his eyes. "You ever hear the phrase 'blood is thicker than water'?"

"I haven't gotten that far in Potions yet," Albus answered breezily.

In a careful voice, Lucy said, "That *was* a rather awful thing to do, Albus, leaving your brother up there like that."

"Oh, he was fine," Albus waved a hand. "It was either him or me. Before I was a Werewolf, I was a Slytherin, remember, and we Slytherins take every break we can get. It's the Gryffindors that are all self-sacrificing and noble. If you look at it that way, I was just helping James to be true to his heritage."

James flung out an arm and backhanded his brother on the shoulder, shoving him backwards. "I'll show you a thing or two about nobility, you sodding git!"

"Ah, ah, ah...," Albus warned, wagging a finger at his brother. "Werewolves look out for each other. Now that I wear the grey and burgundy, anything you do to me is likely to be repaid by the Brotherhood of the Wolf. I'm just giving you fair warning. I don't want to see you get hurt, big brother."

“‘Brotherhood of the Wolf,’” Zane scoffed. “There isn’t a real werewolf in the bunch. If any of your *brotherhood* was confronted by a *real* wolf, they’d scurry like mice.”

Albus rounded on Zane. “But Zombie House is full of the walking undead, right? At least in terms of brainpower, from what I hear.”

“Them’s fightin’ words!” Zane proclaimed stridently.

“Will you both shut it,” Lucy interrupted, getting between the two of them and placing a hand on each one’s chest, pushing them apart. “This is a silly thing to argue about. Everyone knows that *both* the Werewolves and Zombies cower before the dark mystery of Vampire House.”

Zane spluttered while Albus pushed Lucy’s hand away. She smiled haughtily, raised her chin, and walked on.

“She sure picked *that* up fast,” Ralph said, impressed.

“Come on,” Zane urged irritably, yanking Ralph’s elbow. “The Bigfoots’ mansion is over here. Let’s get you inside and introduced to your new pals. I’ve never even seen the inside of the dorm since I’ve never been friends with any Bigfeet.”

James sighed as they walked toward the staid brick structure. Apollo Mansion, home of Bigfoot House, was by far the least interesting of the houses. It stood square and straight in the orange sunset, looking like a sentinel guarding something nobody really wanted. There was virtually no landscaping around the mansion except for a few squat shrubberies that ranged around the foundation in a businesslike manner. A short stone stairway led to the front door, which was adorned with a large pewter knocker in the shape of a foot with splayed toes.

“So, are there any actual Bigfoots in Bigfoot House?” Ralph asked as they climbed the steps.

“Maybe,” Zane shrugged. “That would put them on a level higher than either the Werewolves or the Vampires. They haven’t had any real werewolves or vampires in their houses for centuries.”

James asked, “What about the Pixies, Igors, and Zombies?”

“I don’t know about the Pixies or Igors,” Zane said, reaching for the huge knocker, “but the old President of Zombie House was this crotchety professor named Straidhwait, and he taught class for nearly a week before anyone knew he’d died of brain failure or something. Apparently, he’d spent too much time in deepest Africa during a summer vacation and drank a few too many native potions. Once he found out he was dead, he insisted on being buried in the campus cemetery, ambulatory or not.” Zane grinned at James and Ralph and clacked the door knocker three times, shaking the big wooden door.

“You’re making that up,” Ralph insisted. “They didn’t bury him alive!”

Zane shook his head. “He *wasn’t* alive. He was dead as a doorknob. Said so himself. I hear he performed his own eulogy and told everyone that he was looking forward to being buried. Said it was going to be like the ultimate retirement. It’s engraved on his tomb, in fact. I’ll show you sometime.”

"No thanks," Ralph replied as the door opened. A small boy with pasty skin and huge glasses looked up at Zane.

"I know you," he said meekly. "You gave me donkey's ears last year."

"Did I?" Zane blinked, thinking. "Could be. I gave a lot of people donkey's ears last year. It was all the rage. Hurt, did it?"

The boy stared up at Zane. "No. But it made me want to eat lots of carrots. And it made it easier to hear the lectures in Mageography. I didn't mind, really."

"Good man," Zane said heartily, clapping the boy on the shoulder. The boy tottered.

"I'm James," James said, stepping forward. "And this here's Ralph. We're... er... Bigfoots."

"You sure are," the boy said, looking up and down at Ralph.

"I remember you," Zane said, squinting. "Pastington, right?"

"Paddington," the boy corrected. "Wentworth Paddington."

"Can we come in?" Ralph asked hopefully. "Only, we'd like to get settled into our new rooms. If we have to sleep in the common dorm with that crazy clockwork monkey for one more night..."

"Oh, sure," the boy said blandly, stepping backwards. "Everything's pretty much wherever you find it. The dormitories are all up on the third floor. Game room's in the basement. Everything in between is what it is."

James stepped into the foyer of the house. It was neat and high with a small unlit chandelier dangling overhead. A dusty banner drooped from the chandelier, faded with age. Dark blue letters on an orange background spelled the words 'BIGFOOT PRUDE'.

"Oh, that," Wentworth said, following James' gaze. "That was made by Kowalski's mom when he was a freshman. English isn't exactly her first language, but Kowalski was so proud of it that we couldn't bring ourselves to take it down."

Zane nodded up at the banner. "Makes perfect sense to me, Went. So where's the party at anyway?"

Wentworth blinked behind his huge glasses. "Party?"

"Where's the rest of your Bigfoot pals?" Zane clarified. "And your president? James and Ralph here should probably meet them all, shouldn't they?"

"Oh," Wentworth said uncertainly. "Sure. I guess so. Come on." He turned and padded away, heading toward a huge stairway that dominated the main hall. After a sidelong glance at Ralph and Zane, James followed.

As the four descended into the mansion's basement, they heard a babble of voices and the clack and clatter of billiard balls. Turning a landing at the base of the stairs, James found himself in a low, cluttered room, filled with mismatched sofas and chairs, end tables, and a small galaxy of lamps with battered shades. Students lounged in groups throughout the space or drifted around a

collection of very antique game tables in the dimmer recesses of the basement room. A huge white refrigerator sat like a deflated blimp in the corner, flanked by a stuffed deer's head on one side and a moose head on the other. The moose head wore a tasseled nightcap and seemed to be sleeping. None of the occupants of the room looked up as James, Ralph, and Zane entered.

"He's over there," Wentworth pointed. "In the middle, with his feet on the disarmadillo."

James followed Wentworth's gesture and saw the President of Bigfoot House lounging on a low orange sofa, his feet propped on a small animal that appeared to be half aardvark and half tank. James recognized the man as the one who had sat next to his father at Professor Longbottom's assembly. With a start, he realized that his father was sitting next to the man even now, laughing happily and holding a bottle of some American beer. Harry saw his son from across the room, grinned and waved him over.

"I heard you'd been assigned to Bigfoot House," he called as James, Ralph, and Zane threaded through the various chairs and tables. "You couldn't have found a better home. Er, no matter *what* path got you here," he added, smiling crookedly.

"Hey, Mr. Potter," Zane grinned, plopping onto a nearby chair.

James settled onto a low, bowed sofa and sighed. "So you heard, eh?"

"I suspect most of magical Philadelphia knows by now," Harry replied. "You're a Potter, after all. Your picture will probably be on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* by tomorrow morning, along with a pithy caption written by Rita Skeeter herself."

James slumped on the sofa. "Bloody hell. You really think so?"

"Who cares? You won't be there to see it, at least."

Zane stroked his chin. "Knowing Rose, she'll cut it out and send it to you, though." He glanced at Ralph, who nodded.

"*However* you got here," the man on the sofa next to Harry smiled, "Bigfoot House is proud to have you." The man was relatively young and quite thin with a neat dark haircut and mild features. James could tell by his lack of American accent that he was not originally from the United States.

"Yeah, well, we're glad to finally have a home, I guess," Ralph commented. "Even being a leftover is better than being stuck in the common dorm."

"Oh, we don't have leftovers in Bigfoot House," the House President said, straightening and producing his wand from a back pocket. "All Bigfoots are essential members of the clan. One for all and all for one. Go orange and blue!" With that, the man pointed his wand at James. There was a flash and James startled. He glanced down at himself and saw that his black tie had been transformed to a bright autumn orange, and his blazer was now dark blue. Another flash lit the room and Ralph's uniform was transformed as well.

"Not so handsome as Zombie yellow," Zane said critically, "but better than plain black at any rate. You were starting to look like those stiffness from the Magical Integration Bureau."

"Everyone listen up," the president of the house announced loudly, taking his feet off the disarmedillo and sitting up straight. "This is James Potter and Ralph Deedle, the newest members of Bigfoot House. Let's show them a nice welcome, eh?"

Halfhearted cheers and applause filled the room, lingering rather pathetically as the president beamed at James and Ralph. The disarmedillo wandered slowly away, sniffing at the skirts of the sofas and munching the occasional piece of stale popcorn. When the noise of the cheers finally petered out, James flopped back into the depths of the sofa again.

"So how do you two know each other anyway?" he asked, looking back and forth between his dad and the Bigfoot President.

"Oh, your father and I go way back," the president smiled. "I helped make him the man he is today, in fact. Gave him his first shot, back when he was just a little squitter who barely knew how to hold a wand."

"I think it was Professor McGonagall who actually got me on the team," Harry corrected, shaking his head and smiling. "You just taught me what I needed to know to not get killed on the pitch."

"And a good job I did, too!"

"Anyway," Harry laughed, "as it turns out, James, yours and Ralph's new house is headed up by one of the best professors on campus. He came to the States years ago and, for reasons I can't even begin to guess, decided not to leave. James, Ralph, this is my old friend and fellow Gryffindor, your new president, Oliver Wood."

"Wood!" Zane proclaimed, smacking his forehead. "*That's* your name, not Birch. I was close, though, wasn't I?" He grinned aside at James and Ralph.

"Hey," Wentworth said, tapping James on the shoulder. "There's this big owl on the stairs out front, hooting like crazy and trying to get in the front door. I'm guessing he's yours. You want me to show him to the tower? Or will he be, um... staying with you?"

"Nobby's here!" Zane said climbing to his feet. "Home sweet home all over the place. Come on. I'll help you Bigfoots carry your stuff over from the common dorm. No house-elves in the States, so you gotta do all the footwork yourself. Get it?" he grinned, nudging James. "Footwork?"

"I got it," James said, smiling helplessly. He rolled his eyes, and the three boys clambered back up the steps, heading outside.



One hour later, James stood in the middle of the upstairs bedroom of the common dorm and stared down at his right hand, his eyes wide. On the floor at his feet lay his duffle bag, unzipped and gaping open, where he had just dropped it. He was surprised that he could still hear Zane and Ralph in the hallway outside, struggling to fit Ralph's things into the rickety dumbwaiter. In the center of James' right palm, a soft silver glow was still fading away, like a ball of stormlight.

He shuddered, not knowing what had just happened, but knowing that whatever it was, it was very important. It simply didn't make any sense.

"Merlin," he whispered to himself, his eyes wide. Merlin would understand. He would know. James had just come from seeing him, as per the Headmaster's request, but it wasn't too late to go back again. He hunkered down carefully and reached to zip his duffle bag again, careful not to brush his fingers against the small parchment packet just inside.

After visiting his new house and meeting Oliver Wood, the Bigfoot House President and inexplicable friend of his father (Wood's name had rung a faint bell in James' memory, but if his father had talked about him, it had been a long time ago), things had gotten decidedly weirder as the night progressed.

On the way to the common dorm, James had remembered to stop in at the guest house in the hopes of catching Merlinus before his departure. Seeing his father in the basement of Apollo Mansion had reminded James of his appointment with the Headmaster, and he was very curious about whatever it was the old man meant to give him. Merlin had indeed been there, engaged in what appeared to be a serious discussion in the parlor with Chancellor Franklyn and Neville Longbottom. The room had quieted almost immediately as James, Ralph, and Zane had entered, and James had the distinct sense that it was an uncomfortable pause, brittle as glass. Merlin had welcomed the boys and excused himself from the gathering, claiming that he'd only be absent for a moment.

In the upstairs rooms of the guest house, Merlin had shown the boys to his trunk. Ralph and James had seen it before since it was the very same trunk that they had helped the great wizard retrieve from an ocean cave early last year. It was unusually small—deceptively so, since its nested doors and drawers could open onto still more nested doors and drawers in a rather eye-bending display of conserved magical space. For now, however, Merlin had slipped only one drawer open. The drawer was long and shallow, containing a flat, square object wrapped in cloth. Merlin retrieved it and held it out to James with both hands.

"Last year," he said, "I told you about the effects of very magical objects upon the earth. I told you how they tend to leave very large footprints on the landscape of reality, and that the age of very magical objects was drawing to a close. Upon further reflection, I have determined that this is far truer than even I had known. Contrary to what I originally believed, the balance of the wizarding world is very precarious in this time. The weight of the extremely magical is enough to

affect that balance. I realized that, in the name of that balance, I must do something that I very much did not wish to do. This is the result."

James accepted the object, which was about the size of a small tray and about the same shape. Carefully, he unwrapped it and looked down at it in his hands.

"Cool," Zane said, peering over James' shoulder. "Now you can comb that bird's nest you call a haircut."

Ralph shook his head over James' other shoulder. "Somehow, I think that's for something besides just checking your hair on the way to class."

The thing in James' hands was a mirror in a simple silver frame, apparently perfectly normal except that it felt unusually heavy in his hands. James didn't know if it was the frame or the mirror itself that gave the object its weight. He glanced inquiringly up at Merlin.

"It is, in fact, perfectly appropriate for viewing yourself in," the Headmaster nodded, smiling. "But Mr. Deedle is quite right. That is not all it is good for. Do you happen to have your wand upon you, James?"

James nodded. He set the mirror onto a nearby table and produced his wand from a pocket sewn into the inside of his blazer.

"Excellent," Merlin said, stepping aside. "Now tap the glass and say 'mirror, mirror shard of three, show me where I wish to be.'"

James narrowed his eyes up at the big wizard.

"Go on, James," Zane prodded. "Make with the magic. I'm dying of curiosity here."

James shrugged and tapped the glass with his wand, repeating the phrase exactly as Merlin had said it. As one, the three boys leaned forward, filling the mirror's surface with their reflections. Almost immediately, however, the reflection sank away, replaced by a swirling silvery fog. James and Ralph recognized it almost immediately.

"The *Amsera Certh?*" James asked breathlessly. "But..." He stopped, distracted by a scene that seemed to swim up from the depths of the Mirror, as if its surface was the face of a very deep pool. The image shimmered and resolved into the unmistakable shapes of the Gryffindor common room, albeit dark and empty, with only the ruddy glow of the fireplace illuminating its furnishings.

"No way!" Zane exclaimed. "It's Hoggies! But where's everybody at?"

"It's the middle of the night there, you big div!" Ralph laughed. "But is that really what we're seeing? Is it really Hogwarts?"

"It is," Merlin nodded.

"But how?" James asked, turning to peer back at the Headmaster. "If this is the *Amsera Certh*, why's it so small? And why would you give it to us?"

"It is as I said," Merlin replied, his face somber. "The magical world is simply too precarious to bear the weight of such extremely magical objects as the *Amsera Certh*. I determined that I must

break it up, divide its powers, in order to prevent its influence from adversely impacting the fabric of reality. The truth is, now that I know of the existence of such things as the Vault of Destinies, I am even more confident that I have made the right choice.”

“What about the Focusing Book?” Ralph asked, referring to the book that was the magical counterpart to the original Magic Mirror.

“Destroyed forever,” Merlin sighed. “As with the Mirror of Eris, the *Amsera Certh* is reduced to only its most basic and illusionary powers without the aid of its Focusing Book. With the Book destroyed, and the Mirror divided, its impact upon the world is far lighter. I used my arts to enchant this bit of the Mirror, connecting it to the mirror over the hearth in your former dormitory common room, James. With its help, you will be able to see and interact with your friends at home whenever you wish. I have given your father another Shard, similarly enchanted, which will allow him to speak to his associates at the Ministry of Magic.”

“Excellent!” Zane nodded. “This is way better than using lunarflies and doppelgangers. Raphael will be dead jealous when he hears about this.”

“Alas,” Merlin said gravely, “you must not tell anyone about the Shard. As divided and diminished as its powers are, it must still be kept hidden from those who would wish to use its magic for wicked purposes. Use it to communicate with your friends as you wish, but tell no one here what the Mirror can do or what its origins are. Can you swear obedience to these requirements?”

“Sure,” James answered slowly, nodding. “But... I mean, is it... safe?”

“If you are referring to your inadvertent usage of the *Amsera Certh* last term,” Merlin said, smiling crookedly, “I assure you, the Mirror’s days of capricious trickery are quite over. Like any magical tool, this Shard is exactly as safe as that which you might choose to do with it.”

James nodded, relieved. “Nice. Thanks, Headmaster. We’ll be extra careful with it. And we won’t tell anyone else about it. Will we?”

The other two boys agreed easily and James rewapped the Shard in its cloth. Shortly, Merlin bid the three boys goodbye and rejoined Professor Longbottom and Chancellor Franklyn in the guest room’s parlor. James waved goodbye to Neville, and then, in a lower voice, told him that he’d done an excellent job putting those Progressive Element rabble-rousers in their place at the previous night’s assembly. Neville nodded sheepishly and thanked James.

“Enjoy your new surroundings, boys,” Franklyn said. “I suspect you will find yourselves quite at home within the halls of Apollo Mansion.”

James nodded, feeling dismissed and not particularly liking it. Ralph, however, dragged him by the elbow and a minute later, the three had ducked out of the rear door of the guest house and crossed into the shadow of the common dorm. It had grown rather darker by then, with low clouds obscuring the few stars. The wind switched restlessly and hissed in the tall grass that surrounded the buildings.

Inside, Ralph and Zane manhandled the larger trunks out into the hallway, lugging them toward the dumbwaiter and the waiting clockwork monkey. James slung his duffle bag over his

shoulder and unzipped it awkwardly, meaning to stuff the Shard inside it along with his dirty laundry and toiletries. He turned comically on his feet, reaching around himself to work the Shard into the depths of the bag on his shoulder, and suddenly, shockingly, the world went away.

There was no disorienting sense of speed and no jolt, as with Apparition or Portkeys. The world simply clicked off like a light, and in its place was darkness. James sensed himself still standing, but there seemed to be nothing around him. Emptiness pressed on him like weights, and when he opened his mouth to call out, there didn't seem to be any air, either to breathe or to conduct sound waves.

Panic gripped him suddenly, but before he could act upon it, the darkness swept away. It was as if a monstrous wind blew, bringing with it brightness and light, a ghastly, dead environment, a sky like a gravestone and a looming, black shape, hideous and somehow prehistoric, the architectural equivalent of a petrified dragon. The scene boiled all around James, perfectly still but impossible to look at, as if it was comprised of darning needles, all poking toward him, assaulting his senses. James tried to recoil from the sights, but he was unable to move. A voice came out of the vision, huge and clangy, as if it was the voice of the sky and the earth itself. "She watches," the voice said calmly. "She watches and she waits. Soon I must go to her. It is the only way."

James recognized the voice immediately, even though he'd never heard it sound so huge and terrible. It was the voice of Petra Morganstern. It was the voice of Morgan.

And then, as suddenly as it began, the vision blew away. The dormitory room sprang back into existence around James again, feeling tiny and hot, remarkably mundane in the wake of the teeming vision. A thump came from the ground at James' feet and he looked down dully. His duffle bag had slipped from his shoulder and fallen to the floor. The wrapped Shard poked from the unruly clothing inside. Next to it, unearthed from the depths of the laundry, was Petra's dream story, compressed into a small dense packet of parchment. It glowed very faintly with silvery light.

James raised his right palm and saw the thread there, the one that had connected him to Petra when she had fallen from the stern of the *Gwyndemere*. The thread trailed off like a line of smoke, vanishing after a few feet, fading even as he watched. Somehow, the silver thread was still there, connecting him to her. More importantly, that connection had triggered something when he had touched her dream story. It had been a vision, but one so powerful and shocking that he'd barely been able to register it. Something, he felt quite sure, was happening with Petra, possibly at this very moment. Was something bad happening to her?

Was she *causing* something bad to happen?

A minute later, James joined Ralph and Zane in the hallway. They forced the dumbwaiter doors shut, enclosing the luggage and the clockwork monkey inside. With a ratcheting clatter, the dumbwaiter began to descend toward the lobby below.

"What's with you?" Zane asked, peering sideways at James. "You look white as a ghost."

James shook his head. "I don't know. I think... something's happening."

"Something's always happening, isn't it?" Ralph frowned as they clumped down the stairs.

"I don't know..." James said again, faintly.

They retrieved the trunks from the dumbwaiter and began to lug them out onto the common dorm's stoop.

"Whoa," Ralph said suddenly, looking up. "What's going on over there?"

James didn't want to look, but did anyway. The sky had lowered ever further. It swirled unnaturally over a point nearby, like a very slow, inverted cyclone. Lightning flickered silently in the clouds and wind switched restlessly over the campus, whickering in the trees and scouring dead leaves over the footpaths.

"Where are you going?" Zane called as James stepped slowly down onto the lawn, watching the sky. He didn't answer. Instead, he moved along the lawn, skirting the fountain and its birdbath gargoyles, keeping his eye on the strange, swirling cauldron of clouds. It was making a noise, a sort of dull rumble, like the sound of a hundred freight trains in the dark distance. It was very nearly a growl.

"Is that... you know... normal?" Ralph asked Zane as they moved alongside James. "Like, tell me that it's some sort of side effect of the way the school jumps around in time, right?"

"I've never seen anything like that before," Zane answered seriously.

James lowered his eyes from the swirling purple maelstrom of the clouds and found himself looking at the squat mass of the Hall of Archives. The stormy phenomenon was directly above the building.

"She watches," James heard himself say. "She watches and she waits."

A tongue of lightning connected the clouds and the Hall of Archives, and the ground leapt beneath James' feet. A blast of purple light illuminated the building from within, spearing through every crack and from the seams of every brick. Pencil beams shot from the tiny windows in the domed roof, spearing up into the sky. A split second later, the light was gone, leaving only blinding green afterimages on James' retinas.

"What," Zane asked in an awed voice, "was that?"

James shook his head very slowly. The sky seemed to have exhausted itself. The clouds broke up slowly overhead and there was a lingering coppery taste in the air. In the darkness beneath the Hall of Archives portico, the door opened. Two figures strode out into the dusky evening light and descended the steps. One of them was robed in black from head to toe and James found himself thinking of the mysterious woman whom he had first met in the midnight halls of the Aquapolis, the one who had appeared again later, during the attack on the *Zephyr*, and then vanished afterwards. She walked on into the deepening darkness, but the second figure lingered for a moment on the footpath, looking around slowly.

"Is that...?" Ralph began, but there was no point in finishing the question. All three boys could see who it was.

It was Petra. She looked around with interest, as if seeing the campus for the first time. Her dark eyes stopped when she saw the three boys, but it was James that she seemed to focus on. She smiled slowly. And then she waved.

“What is happening here?” a voice demanded shrilly. James turned around and saw Chancellor Franklyn moving swiftly across the darkened campus, nearing them. His face looked very pale in the stormy darkness. Merlin and Neville Longbottom were following him, looking around carefully.

“Did you feel it?” Zane asked. “The ground shook! Right when the lightning happened! Pow!”

Franklyn passed the boys with barely a glance, approaching the Hall of Archives and its open door. The dim lights that had previously shown from the building’s tiny windows had been extinguished in the aftermath of the blast.

“Oh dear,” Franklyn muttered darkly. “Oh great heavens. What has happened...?”

Merlin stopped near James. Without taking his eyes from the Hall of Archives, he asked in a very low voice, “Did you see anyone?”

James considered lying. For a moment, he considered telling Merlin that he hadn’t seen anything at all, especially not Petra looking strange and vaguely malevolent. The moment passed.

“I saw Petra,” he answered quietly, almost whispering. “She and someone else—a woman I think—came out of the Hall right after... whatever it was.”

Merlin nodded slowly, with grave emphasis. He didn’t say anything in response. He didn’t need to.



10. JAMES AND THE SKRIM

Students had begun to gather in the darkness around the Hall of Archives by the time Professor Jackson arrived and set up a perimeter of Werewolf House upperclassmen to guard the entrance. The grey-clothed students stood with military precision, hands clasped behind their backs, eyes staring out over the crowd as if daring anyone to try to pass them. Ralph, James, and Zane stood well back from the gathering observers, watching the proceedings with mixed curiosity and trepidation.

Ralph frowned at the Werewolf guards in the near distance. “What kind of stuff do they have in the Archive anyway?”

“I was only in there once before,” James replied, shrugging.

Zane was impressed. “Are you kidding?” he rasped. “I’ve been on campus a whole year and I’ve never once been allowed into the Archive chambers. Hardly anyone gets to go inside except for Bad Hadley and his student tech crew.”

“Is that a difficult crew to get on?” Ralph asked, looking aside at Zane.

“Nah, they’re always looking for new members,” Zane replied, shaking his head. “There’re sign-up sheets all over campus. But that’s like actual work. I wasn’t *that* curious.”

James asked, “So who’s Bad Hadley anyway?”

“Hadley Henredon,” Zane answered, lowering his voice. “He’s the Archive custodian. A Muggle, but totally devoted to his job. There’s some long tedious story about how he got the position in the first place, but you’ll have to ask somebody else about it if you really want to know. He’s old and terminally cranky, and he goes by loads of nicknames around the campus: Bad Hadley,

Hadley the Horrible, the Henredonkey, Captain Fisheye, Evil Enos, etc, etc, etc. Us Zombies came up with most of them.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed,” Ralph muttered.

Just then, Harry Potter and Oliver Wood arrived, crossing the lawns and cutting through the noisome throng. Zane saw them first, and grabbed Ralph’s sleeve.

“Come on,” he hissed, ducking through the knot of students.

“Where are we going?” Ralph asked, following along with James in tow.

Zane glanced back with a crooked grin. “Where else? To see what happened inside the Archive.”

James shook his head as they ducked through the babbling crowd. “They’ll never let us in there,” he whispered harshly.

“Sure they will,” Zane replied without looking back. “Just follow me and walk like you don’t expect anyone to stop you. You’d be amazed how often that works.”

James found himself falling into step behind his own father and Professor Wood as they ascended the steps. Next to him, Zane glanced around wisely, as if he was taking inventory of the pillars around the portico. He had his wand in his hand, held importantly at his side. James produced his own wand and held it the same way. Behind them, Ralph scuffled up the steps, pushing his lank hair out of his face. Almost before he knew it, the three boys found themselves ushered into the darkened entryway of the Hall, following in Harry Potter’s wake. The noise of the nervous crowd fell away behind them.

“Mr. Potter,” a voice echoed from the inner chamber. “I’m glad to see you’ve arrived. Your particular expertise might be of great value as we descend to the Archive floor.” It was Chancellor Franklyn, his wand lit and held overhead, providing the only light in the huge empty room.

“He seems to have gained some stowaways as well,” a woman’s voice commented. James recognized the Wizard Home Economics professor, Mother Newt, as she moved into the light next to Franklyn. “Excuse me, boys, but this is no place for students. You must leave this instant.”

“We’re witnesses!” Zane exclaimed suddenly, pushing James and Ralph forward. “The three of us saw it happen!”

“You witnessed the attack on this building?” Franklyn clarified, narrowing his eyes at Zane.

“Attack?” Ralph replied. “We saw lightning strike it. And we saw—”

“They were moving their belongings into their new house, Chancellor,” Merlin interrupted. “If you’ll recall, they visited us in the guest house a short while before. Their activities placed them in the vicinity of the phenomena when it occurred. It may prove valuable to interview them presently.”

“And this one,” Harry said, shaking his head and smiling down at James, “is my son, of course. He and these other two are quite trustworthy. I have called upon their services in the past.”

Franklyn removed his square spectacles and wiped them on his lapel, sighing. "As you wish. But let it be known that the school will not take any responsibility for anything that may befall them in this endeavor."

"Nor would I expect it to," Harry replied. "You mentioned with some confidence that what happened here was, in fact, an attack. How can you be so sure?"

"Did you feel the shift?" Franklyn asked in response.

"The shift?" Wood repeated thoughtfully. "Is that what it was?"

"I felt a shake of the earth," Harry said, "as if a giant had stomped nearby. Is that what you are referring to?"

"That was not a shake of the earth," a new voice said calmly. James looked up and saw Professor Jackson stride into the light from the rear of the room. His face was set into a grim scowl, but his eyes were electric as he glanced from face to face, ending on Harry. "The earth did not move," he went on. "Your brain merely attributed the sensation to the most obvious source, but the shift took place on a much deeper, fundamental level."

"I felt it," Zane nodded. "It was as if the whole world suddenly stopped moving, making everything stumble for a moment."

Merlin's voice was solemn in the darkness. "But it wasn't the world, was it, Professor? It was, if I may be so bold as to guess, the very fabric of reality."

"It was a dimensional shift," Jackson agreed soberly. "How deep a shift, we have yet to discover."

"And the occurrence of this... shift," Harry clarified, tilting his head, "is why you suspect the Hall of Archives was attacked?"

Jackson nodded once, curtly. "Mere lightning is not capable of what transpired here tonight, Mr. Potter."

"I suggest we avoid using the elevator," Franklyn announced, turning and striding toward the recessed door in the rear of the room. "Wands out, everyone. We cannot be certain that what happened here is entirely over. Professor Jackson and I will lead. Mother Newt, if you would be willing to stand guard at the upstairs entrance."

Newt agreed to this with palpable reluctance. She moved next to the inner archive door and produced her wand with a flourish, leaving a trail of pink sparks in the air.

"Careful, dearies," she said, smiling cryptically as James, Zane, and Ralph passed her, heading into the massive chamber beyond.

Inside, Ralph and Zane craned their heads at the marching rows of shelved miscellany and the massive chasm that dropped into the Archive's spiraling depths. Silently, Franklyn led the group toward the stairway, which they began to descend in single file, with James, Ralph, and Zane in the rear.

As the group circled the throat of the Archive's staircase, James could see that the strange gold and purple light of the object at the bottom, the thing Franklyn had called the Vault of Destinies, was diminished to the point of darkness. Even more unsettling, the complicated motion of the Vault had completely ceased. It sat in the dim depths like a sort of gigantic gold and glass rose, its petals curled around some hidden shape. The group tromped on in somber silence, listening only to the shuffling clang of their feet on the metal steps. As they passed the lowest of the Archive's dizzying levels, the air grew so cold that James could see his breath puffing out before him. He shivered and pulled his blazer around him, buttoning it up.

Finally, the group reached the floor of the Archive and congregated in the darkness at the base of the stairs. The lowest level was smaller than the rest, and nearly empty. The stone walls dripped with cold water and tiny stalactites hung from the bottom of the stairs above like icicles. The center of the space was a round pool, its water mirror-flat. Over this, the Vault of Destinies was suspended inside a complicated iron framework. Close up, the Vault seemed quite large, slightly taller than Merlin, and comprised entirely of leaf-shaped golden shutters and purplish prisms. In motion, the overlapping shapes would form a dizzying shield of flashing metal and enchanted glass. Now, halted, they embraced the interior shape like a clenched fist. James tried to see inside, but couldn't make anything out.

"Professor Jackson, if you would extend the walkway," Franklyn said quietly, gesturing toward the pool and the dark Vault.

Jackson moved forward and flicked his wand, pronouncing a complicated incantation under his breath. A dull grinding noise sounded, and James startled as something floated over his shoulder. He was surprised to see that it was a block of stone, prized magically from the wall behind him. It floated past Jackson and lowered, touching the pool but not sinking. More stones wafted into place, forming a neat pathway that led toward the Vault. Franklyn stepped forward, his boots knocking on the stones, and raised his wand. Harry followed him, and James and Zane watched raptly, peering curiously at the darkly glimmering shape of the Vault.

Franklyn glanced back, his eyes wide, and James saw that the Chancellor was quite shaken. "My friends," he said, swallowing hard. "Never once has the magic of the Vault been breached. Never once has it been stilled, even by my own hand. Assuming that it opens now..." He paused and shook his head, apparently at a loss for words.

Harry nodded soberly and raised his wand, tip up. "Stay well back, James, and the rest of you. If you wish to return to the outside, now is your chance. None will blame you, and most will credit you for it. Professor Wood will accompany you if you choose to go."

Wood nodded and looked around. James shook his head, as did Zane.

"I know I should probably go," Ralph squeaked. "But if I do, I'll kick myself for the rest of my life. So open it already."

Professor Jackson fingered his own wand. "Open it, Chancellor. If the shift means what I fear, being outside the Archive will make no difference for any of us."

Franklyn nodded. He turned back to the Vault, his shoulders hunched, and raised his wand once more. Slowly, he lowered it, and as he did, the leaves began to move. Starting at the top, they began to shuttle aside, turning and descending silently, aligning with and overlapping the ones beneath. With solemn grace, the Vault bloomed, spreading and opening, revealing the shape inside, which was dark and complicated with shadows. As the final golden leaves settled into place, Franklyn stepped forward and raised his wand. Its light fell onto a shape that seemed to loom suddenly up out of the darkness, boggling with bulging eyes, its mouth gaping horribly. James gasped in shock and fear, as did Zane and Ralph. Zane's hand snatched out and grabbed a handful of James' blazer, as if for support.

"Hadley!" Franklyn cried out hoarsely, reaching to touch the figure that stood before him.

"I wouldn't do that," Merlin announced loudly, halting Franklyn and commanding his attention. Franklyn glanced back.

"It's Mr. Henredon! The custodian! He's been... he's...!"

"He looks like a statue," Harry said carefully, moving next to Franklyn on the stone footpath. "It's as if he was turned to stone in the act of trying to intervene in... whatever happened."

"He's been frozen," Merlin said, approaching slowly. "From the inside out. Every drop of his blood has been frozen as solid and brittle as glass."

"Is he... dead?" Franklyn asked, peering at the eerily still figure. Hadley's face seemed locked in a permanent rictus of wide-eyed terror. His right hand was stretched out before him, the fingers petrified into a grasping claw.

"He isn't dead, precisely," Merlin answered carefully. "He is... suspended. If any of us were to touch him, however, the warmth of our skin might... shatter him."

Franklyn recoiled slightly, his face contorting.

Jackson had his wand ready. "Stand aside, gentlemen," he instructed.

With impressive delicacy, Jackson levitated the frozen figure of Hadley up out of the unfurled shape of the Vault and settled him into place on the wet stone of the floor beneath the stairs. Hadley's shoes made a sound like clacking crockery when they touched the floor and the puddle froze instantly around them, producing a faint crackling hiss.

"Can we help him?" Harry asked, watching stoically.

"Only time and a very subtle increase in temperature will answer that question," Merlin sighed. "If he had been frozen outside of this already frosty climate, the warmth of the very air might have been enough to fracture him."

"We have the means and the facility to do whatever is required on his behalf," Jackson announced. "There is nothing further we can do for him at the moment, however. Let us attend to that which brought us here."

As one, the gathering turned toward the dark shape nestled inside the unfurled leaves of the Vault. Franklyn stepped forward once more and raised his wand, letting its light fall over the object.

To James, it looked like a sort of wooden table or platform, covered in ornate curlicue carvings and painted painstakingly in shades of blue and gold. Thick beams stood upright within and over the platform, holding a complicated apparatus of hinged arms, treadles, and spoked wheels. At one end of the platform, standing like vibrantly coloured totems, were thick spools of thread. At the other end, a banner of thick, richly patterned fabric trailed toward the floor, where it overlapped onto itself in gentle folds. As James peered closer, he saw that the fabric was a sort of tapestry or rug, and that it was, in fact, extremely long, folded back and forth on itself dozens, maybe even hundreds of times. The wooden object itself seemed to be sitting on the mound of carpet, held up by it in the center of the Vault's folded leaves.

"It's a loom," Oliver Wood said, his voice low with awe.

Jackson nodded slowly. "It is indeed. Its innumerable threads represent the lives of every living person on the planet. It is their history, condensed into a pattern so complex, so interwoven, that none can decipher it."

"Then that," Harry said, gesturing toward the carpet that pooled from the Loom's end, "is all of the world's history."

Franklyn sighed and nodded toward the spools of richly coloured thread at the opposite end. "And that, as you might imagine, is the future, unmade and unknowable."

Merlin asked the most obvious question of all. "Then why, pray tell, is the Loom stopped?"

"I believe that it was annihilated," Jackson answered.

Harry turned toward the steely-haired professor. "How can that be?" he asked. "It's right here."

"This is *a* Loom," Jackson replied meaningfully, "but it is not *our* Loom."

"I'm a little lost here," Wood said, raising his hand.

Franklyn shook his head worriedly. "What Professor Jackson is saying is that the Loom equals destiny. Destinies cannot be destroyed since they are representations of things far larger, far heavier than any of us could comprehend. They are like the axles of existence, utterly unbreakable and inviolate. Theoretically, however, they *can* be... *shifted*. Given a shock of enough magnitude, the destiny of one reality can be forced into the next, causing a chain reaction throughout every dimension."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "If I understand you correctly, Chancellor, Professor Jackson, you are suggesting that the Loom of *our* universe was attacked in some monumental way, and the result was that our Loom was switched with that of *another* universe. Is that an accurate summary?"

"That's crazy," Oliver Wood frowned. "You can't swap destinies."

Merlin shook his head very slowly. "On the contrary, Professor, human beings swap destinies every day, at every moment. Each individual's destiny is, of course, merely the sum total of the choices that they make throughout their lives. This, however, is on a magnitude far greater."

"According to my theories," Jackson went on, squinting closely at the Loom, "our reality should have instantly rejected any foreign destiny. In other words, the very moment that our Loom was forced into another realm, and was replaced with the Loom of some other reality, the balance of the cosmos should have mandated the switch to reverse itself. Something, it appears, is interrupting the self-correcting paradigm of the dimensional continuum."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, shaking his head. "Technomancy was never my strong suit. I don't quite understand."

Zane spoke up, surprising James. "Somebody switched the destiny of our universe with some other destiny," he said seriously. "And then they jammed a chair under the doorknob, forcing that destiny to be stuck here for good, instead of reverting back to where it came from."

"What does that mean?" Wood asked, looking from face to face. "And how did it happen?"

Jackson stepped forward, still peering narrowly at the halted Loom. "It very well might mean that our reality, from this moment on, could be steadily degrading, breaking down, and grinding into chaos," he said with characteristic bluntness. "As for *how* it happened, what is preventing this Loom from returning to the alternate reality from whence it came... I think the answer to that is quite obvious." He bent slightly at the waist, not taking his eyes from the Loom.

James followed his gaze, stepping forward as well. Everyone did. At first, James couldn't see what it was that the professor was looking at. Franklyn raised his wand once more, however, illuminating the Loom, and the problem became immediately apparent. Something glimmered very faintly in the air over the working space of the Loom, where the countless threads came together and melded into the ever constant flow of the carpet.

One of the threads had been broken and torn out of the carpet. What was left of it was bright red, shining almost as if it was made of finely spun wire. It waved very faintly in the air, forming a curling shape over the fabric from which it had been torn, leaving only the bit that fed from the spools. The broken thread made a shape in the air almost like a question mark.

"Well," Merlin said slowly, his voice so low that it seemed to vibrate, "this... changes everything."



The Kite and Key was a small tavern built in one of the oldest quarters of the campus, on the far side of Faculty Row, near a corner of the stone wall that enclosed the school. It served many of the same drinks as James had once procured at the Three Broomsticks, including Butterbeer, pumpkin juice and, for the older students, Firewhisky. Not surprisingly, however, it also served some distinctly American drinks and potions, such as Honeylager (which tasted a bit like a Butterbeer that had been allowed to ferment on a windowsill for a week or two) and, also for the older students and faculty, a very dark brown potion with a frothy head called Dragonmeade.

Franklyn drank two Dragonmeades as the night progressed while Harry, Oliver Wood, and Professor Jackson settled for Honeylagers as they discussed the evening's events in low, serious tones. Mother Newt sat in the corner of the table closest to the tiny bay window, knitting and humming to herself, and yet James could tell that she didn't miss a single word that was spoken. This was born out by the few things that she did say, which were always heeded with great deference by the others at the table.

James, Ralph, and Zane sat at the end of the table, nursing Butterbeers and trying to keep up with the discussion. The adults' low, confidential tones of voice, however, and the noise of the rest of the tavern made their attempts to listen rather frustrating.

"Either way," Mother Newt said finally, not looking up from her knitting, "a destiny is a destiny, no matter which Loom represents it. The world still turns. We each have our choices laid before us, as has always been."

"But this Loom has ceased its operation," Jackson replied, raising an eyebrow.

Newt nodded, still knitting casually. Beneath her industrious fingers pooled a small sweater with a jack-o'-lantern on the front under the words, 'GRAMMA'S LITTLE PUNKIN'. "But it is not our Loom, as you have so astutely discovered, Professor. Wherever our Loom is, it may still be operating, still recording everything we do, just as always."

In a low voice, Wood asked, "And what of the realm from which *this* Loom has come?"

Newt clucked her tongue. "Perhaps they are not so lucky. Or perhaps their Loom was already stopped. Perhaps it comes from a realm not as fortunate as ours, and their destiny has already met its doom. There is no way for us to know, but fortunately, it is not our concern."

"Mother Newt is quite right," Franklyn agreed, settling his empty Dragonmeade glass onto the table. A dragon's talon clinked in the bottom of the glass, black and hooked. "We have only one concern, and we must treat it with the utmost care and secrecy."

James looked up at his father as he nodded somberly, his glasses flashing in the dim light of the Kite and Key's hanging lanterns. "We must find the missing red thread," he agreed. "Once it is returned to the Loom, it may set everything to rights once again. If it were possible to know who that particular thread represents, our task might be substantially easier."

"You may be certain that we will spend all of our considerable arts on that particular question," Franklyn said. "Professor Jackson is the foremost expert on the Loom. If anyone can discover its secrets, it is him."

Jackson sighed and shook his head. "Alas, it may be impossible. But we shall see what can be done."

"In the meantime," Harry added briskly, "I will do my part. Now that the witnesses have been interviewed properly in the Chancellor's office." He turned to James, Ralph, and Zane and eyed them seriously. "Thanks to them, we have our first lead. Two women, one grown, the other in her late teens, were seen leaving the scene of the attack mere moments after it occurred." Here, he winked at James, unsmiling. James understood the wink. Merlin had purposely arranged for Petra's name to be left out of the official account, but Harry Potter was privy to the secret. James nodded at his father, frowning slightly.

"There is another lead," Mother Newt commented, looking up seriously. "The stolen thread itself will leave its own trail."

Franklyn nodded. "Quite so. It is well-known that the Loom is intensely magical. This is why we store it buried deep in the earth, where its radiant enchantment cannot interfere with the day-to-day magic of the school. A stolen thread from the Loom, especially that taken from a Loom from some foreign dimension, will leave a magical imprint as powerful as any single object in the wizarding world. As we speak, I have alerted the local authorities to fan out across the city in search of any unusual sources of power. I suspect we will discover the trail of the thread almost immediately. Let us hope, if and when we do, that it will not already be too late."

Feeling somewhat mollified by Franklyn's assurance, James stopped listening. Some time later, he, Ralph, and Zane finished their Butterbeers and excused themselves from the gathering. Only Harry and Oliver Wood noticed, waving goodbye to the boys as they made their way to the tavern's tiny doorway.

Outside, the moon had risen high into the sky, shining brightly now that the clouds had blown away. Moonlight lit the campus eerily, making the glow of the scattered lampposts seem rather unnecessary. The boys spoke in low voices as they made their way across the campus, stopping at the entry to the common dorm to retrieve James' and Ralph's trunks and bags. In the near distance, the Administration Hall's clock tower rang out, announcing nine o'clock.

As the boys returned to Apollo Mansion, lugging and levitating their various trunks, they discovered a group of witches sitting on the low portico, speaking in hushed voices. Lucy was among them, as was Aunt Audrey and James' mum. Ginny stood as the boys approached, her eyes bright in the moonlight.

"Is everybody all right?" Lucy asked. James saw that she was still wearing her Vampire House tie and blazer, buttoned against the slight chill of the evening.

"Everybody's fine," Zane sighed. "It's the world that's in sorry shape. According to everybody who knows anything about anything, it's high time we packed up and started looking for a new dimension."

Ginny shook her head dismissively. "I'm sure it isn't as bad as that," she said. "It rarely ever is."

"I'm going to walk Lucy back to her dormitory," Aunt Audrey sighed, getting to her feet from the front steps. "I'll meet you back at the guest house in a little while, Ginevra, to see Neville and the Headmaster off. That's assuming that they still plan to leave tonight."

"I suspect so," Ginny agreed. "Goodnight Lucy. Lily says congratulations on getting into Vampire House. She's started reading those books by your new Head of House, and she's totally jealous of you."

James rolled his eyes as he pulled his trunk up onto the portico. "Where is Lil anyway?"

"She's back at our new flat with your Uncle Percy and Molly. Percy will probably blow a cauldron when he hears what happened here tonight, and him not here to get all worked up about it." She sighed and settled to a seat on James' trunk. "Wait with me, won't you, son? Your father promised he'd be back before nine thirty. Keep your mum company until then." She patted the trunk next to her, where there was just enough room for James to sit as well. He did and she put her arm around him. Ralph and Zane plopped onto another trunk at the base of the steps, resting their chins on their hands, as if too tired to go on. The moon shone on them all with its bony glow and James couldn't help worrying. It had been a strange, foreboding evening, and the worst of it still seemed to be happening, what with the stopped Loom and the missing thread and the twin mysteries of Petra's involvement and the enigmatic woman that had been with her. He sighed deeply, feeling greatly unsettled.

"I almost forgot," Ginny said, sitting up suddenly. "You left this in the galley of the *Gwyndemere*. Captain Farragut gave it to me before we disembarked." She retrieved her shoulder bag and rummaged in it. A moment later, she produced a thick grey sweater from the depths of the small bag. "Your grandmother made this for you," she said reproachfully, handing the sweater to her son. "If she learned you'd lost it during the voyage..."

"She'd probably make me a new one out of Devil's Snare," James sighed. He knew the mantra of their family quite well.

"That's right," Ginny smiled. "Now put it on before you catch cold out here. You two should bundle up as well. It's getting chilly and late."

"Yes ma'am," Zane said hollowly, not making any effort to get up.

Ginny looked from face to face, her brow lowered slightly. Finally she took James' chin in her hand and turned his face to hers. "Cut it out!" she said sternly, surprising him.

"What?" he exclaimed, pulling away. "I'm not doing anything!"

"Yes you are," she insisted seriously. "All three of you are. I recognize it as plain as day. You're getting all wrapped up in what happened tonight. Pretty soon you'll start feeling like you all need to go out and do something huge and daring to set it to rights. I see it on your faces as plain as day. So cut it out!"

"We're not, Mum!" James protested, his face reddening. "We're just sitting here, for Merlin's sake!"

Ginny softened very slightly. "I know the look," she said, shaking her head. "You can't grow up around the likes of your father, Uncle Ron, and Aunt Hermione and not recognize when the wheels of some half-brained adventure start turning."

"Well," Ralph said, sitting up on his trunk, "we were there when the Archive was attacked, after all. We saw what happened. And we know even more about it than Chancellor Franklyn does, thanks to Merlin. We have something to do with it already, don't we? It's not our fault fate keeps doing stuff like this to us."

"*That's* what I'm talking about," Ginny said firmly. "Look, you won't hear me say this very often, so pay attention. Fate is a nasty, sneaky prankster. You don't have to do what she tells you, no matter what the storybooks say. You *do* have to do what *I* tell you. Zane Walker, I've met your mother and if she was here, she'd tell you the same thing I am. And Ralph, I'm the closest thing you've *got* to a mum, so you heed me as well. You three already have a job to do, but it isn't saving the world. It's learning Arithmancy, and playing Quidditch and whatever that strange American sport is with all the rings and Cudgels, and... well, meeting girls. If the world needs saving, then it's a job best left to your father and Merlin and the rest of them. They've all done it before, after all. It's rather old hat for them. You don't need to worry about it."

James sighed and rolled his eyes. "We're not, Mum. Lay off us, all right?"

Ginny met her son's eyes and searched them. After a long moment, she seemed to grudgingly accept what she saw there. She nodded slowly.

"It's going to be all right," she said, turning to address the three of them. "Are you hearing me? You lot don't need to worry about it. It's going to be fine. It always is, isn't it?"

James nodded as his mother put her arm around him again. It did always seem to end up being all right, no matter how bad things looked at any given moment. And yet he couldn't help thinking of Merlin's words when they'd all seen the Loom with its broken crimson thread: *this changes everything*.

And on the heels of that, echoing in his memory like a tickling feather, he recalled Scorpius Malfoy's comment on the morning their journey had begun. *Fate seems to enjoy placing you Potters right onto the bull's-eyes of history*, he'd said, as if anticipating James' mother's words. *It might be a good idea to try not to be too... distracted if that should happen again.*

In the moonlight, James shuddered slightly under his mother's arm.



As with all initially unfamiliar things, James found life at Alma Aleron dizzyingly foreign at first, and then merely odd, and finally, nearing the end of his first week, only occasionally eccentric but otherwise fairly manageable.

Unlike the sleeping quarters he had been used to at Hogwarts, the Bigfoot dormitory was divided into a warren of small bedrooms on the third floor, extending up into the attic. Some of the rooms housed as many as six students, but Ralph and James found themselves in a very small two-person room at the end of the main hall. Upon inspection, James determined that until fairly recently, the room had probably served as a maintenance closet. This suspicion was cemented late during their first night when the janitor came in and shone a torch around the room, claiming to be in search of a spare mop. He didn't seem particularly surprised to find James and Ralph blinking blearily at him from the darkness, however, and spent some time rummaging under their beds in search of the missing mop, which he eventually found.

Over the course of the first few days of school, James and Ralph enlisted Zane's help in decorating their room, filling it with Quidditch posters, a makeshift Gryffindor banner (hung tactfully next to a Bigfoot House crest), an old carpet they'd rescued from the trash cans behind the common dorm, and a small bust of Sir Percival Pepperpock, which was enchanted to say amusingly crass phrases whenever the dorm room door opened.

The upshot of life in Apollo Mansion, however, was that the rest of Bigfoot House seemed to accept James and Ralph with a fairly universal degree of equanimity, nearly approaching boredom. They seemed to be a good and loyal bunch, surprisingly diverse, with members from all over the world and even representing a variety of humanoid species. There was a sophomore goblin named Nicklebrigg and an overweight junior Veela named Jazmine Jade, upon whom Ralph seemed to have a rather hopeless crush despite her obvious, and perplexing, lack of self-esteem. There was even an actual Bigfoot with long ape-like arms, feet the size of frying pans, and an inexplicable predilection for polka music, which he played for hours at a time on the house's ancient record player.

Oliver Wood was quick to introduce James and Ralph to all of their housemates during evenings spent in the basement game room, under the twin gazes of the stuffed deer and moose heads, affectionately known as Heckle and Jeckle. Both boys found themselves becoming increasingly familiar with the names and faces of their fellow Bigfoots as they passed them on their way to the common bathroom each morning. There were no bullies or obnoxious gits in Bigfoot House, but neither were there any apparently shining stars, either academically or athletically.

"We're a team," Wood proclaimed happily, nodding at the Bigfoots as they congregated around the game room of an evening. "No standouts on either end, but that just makes us stronger in the middle. No other house can boast that."

Secretly, James wondered if that was such a particularly good thing. When he asked Zane about it, the boy nodded enthusiastically.

"I know exactly what you mean!" he exclaimed. "Apart from you and the Ralphinator, Bigfoot House is like a magnet for the mediocre. It's like living on the Island of Misfit Toys!"

James didn't understand the reference and stopped Zane with a sigh and a roll of his eyes when the blonde boy attempted to explain it.

Getting the hang of all the new classes was by far the hardest part of adjusting to life at Alma Aleron. Finding the classrooms, which were scattered all over the sprawling autumn campus, was made far easier by the fact that Zane seemed to be in almost all of the same classes as James and Ralph, and he knew his way around the campus very well.

The class names, however, often seemed unnecessarily obtuse and confusing. Many of the classes James was accustomed to at Hogwarts didn't seem to have any American equivalent whatsoever. On the other hand, the American wizarding curriculum included courses on such things as Muggle Occupation Studies (or Mug-Occ, as it was known among the students) and Clockwork Mechanics, which were not at all a part of James' previous Hogwarts studies.

Some of the classes he liked quite a lot, such as Magi-American History, which was taught by a full-fledged American giant named Paul Bunyan, and Advanced Elemental Transmutation, which was the American version of Transfiguration. Others he dreaded exquisitely, such as Precognitive Engineering and Mageography, with the stultifyingly dull Professor Wimrinkle. His most hated class, however, was the American equivalent of Defense Against the Dark Arts, known locally as Forbidden Practices and Cursology. Taught by the insufferable Persephone Remora, the only students that seemed to enjoy the class were the members of her own Vampire House, who adored and revered the professor with something like fanatical devotion.

As it turned out, Remora had made quite a reputation for herself by writing a series of wizarding romance novels about fictional American vampires with amazingly cool names and darkly dashing personalities. In class, she made thinly veiled references to the ongoing progress of her latest book, claiming that her stories were not fictional at all, but merely novelized accounts of her own life experiences.

"Much like another series of books based loosely on the exploits of a certain famous wizard," she said in class, sniffing disdainfully and glancing furtively at James. "Although mine," she went on breezily, "are not biased in favor of the main characters. *I* write my tales exactly as they happened, with an eye toward intellectual honesty."

"*And* adjective-heavy run-on sentences," Zane mumbled under his breath, his face low over his parchment as he doodled.

The Shard of the *Amsera Certh* had proven to be exactly as refreshing to James and Ralph as Merlin had implied. Most afternoons, James would return to his and Ralph's dormitory room on the third floor of Apollo Mansion and uncover the Shard. He'd tap it with his wand and say the phrase that Merlin had taught him and watch as the Gryffindor common room swam into view, usually filled with late evening activity. The first time he had done it, both Ralph and Zane had been with him, and they had succeeded in startling Cameron Creevey quite badly, calling his name from the enchanted mirror over the Gryffindor fireplace.

"Cam!" James had called, cupping his hands to his mouth and leaning close to the Shard where it hung on the back of his dormitory room door. "Cam! Can you hear me? It's me and Ralph and Zane! Where's Rose and everybody?"

Cameron had lowered the Potions book he'd been studying and glanced around uncertainly. When James called his name again, the boy looked up, saw the three boys' faces in the mirror over the hearth, and leapt neatly over the back of the hearth sofa, throwing his book into the air. A second later, he peered over the back of the sofa, his eyes wild.

"Somebody killed James!" he cried out shrilly. "And Ralph Deedle! And that third bloke, the blonde one that they hung out with their first year! They're haunting us in the mirror! Look!" He pointed frantically as James, Ralph, and Zane dissolved into laughter. It was nearly a minute before they could recover enough to explain to the gathered students on the other side of the Shard that they weren't ghosts at all, but were simply communicating from the States via Merlin's magical Mirror.

As they finished, James heard Rose's voice as she pushed through the crowd of Gryffindors. "James? Is that you? Move aside, Paulson, you great ape!" She elbowed her way to the front and leaned close to the mirror on her side. "James," she asked gravely, "what are the three of you doing in the mirror?"

James drew a breath to answer, but Rose shook her head impatiently. "Never mind. Tell me this first: is it true that the American students get to take weekly field trips to some giant unplottable prairie where Native American Indians still sleep in teepees and live like they did three hundred years ago? Because if it is, I don't even want to talk to you again out of sheer dead jealousy."

"No, Rose," James laughed. "Nothing like that's happened. So far, classes here are almost just like classes back home. Some are good, some are bad, but it's just school. Different country, same routine."

Rose sighed skeptically. "All right then," she said, plopping onto the sofa. Cameron Creevey was still peering over it, his eyes wide. Rose planted a hand on the side of his head and shoved him away. "So how is it there, then? How are you two and Lucy and everyone else settling in? Tell me everything, spare nothing."

James shook his head helplessly, not knowing where to begin. Zane, however, skipped right to the bit that most interested him. "Petra's turned all evil schizo on us!" he exclaimed, his eyes going wide. "She attacked the Hall of Archives and destroyed life as we know it!"

"Shut *up!*" James said, pushing his friend aside. "We're not supposed to talk about that! And besides, she says that it *wasn't* her!"

"She says that she was asleep when it happened, along with Izzy in her rooms on campus," Ralph clarified, raising a finger. "And Merlin only told us to keep it a secret around the school. He didn't say anything about our friends back home."

"Wait a minute," a different voice said from the other side of the Shard. James looked up and saw Scorpius Malfoy seating himself on the sofa next to Rose as the rest of the students drifted

back to their homework and various conversations. “What’s this about Morganstern? Are you telling us that she’s already gotten into trouble with the Americans?”

“No!” James said immediately, glancing warily at Ralph and Zane. “There was some confusion, but nobody really knows what happened. It’s... complicated.”

Together, the three boys explained the events that surrounded the attack on the Vault of Destinies, ending with the details of their interview with Chancellor Franklyn, Merlin, and James’ father in the Chancellor’s office, which had occurred later that night.

“So Merlin didn’t let you tell the Americans that it was Petra you saw leaving the Archive?” Rose asked, frowning.

“He didn’t really stop us from saying so,” Ralph answered. “He just sort of... explained it to Franklyn on our behalf, leaving that bit out, and we didn’t contradict him. It helped that those crazy loons at the W.U.L.F. released an announcement the next day claiming that *they* had been the ones responsible for the attack. They said that if Harry Potter and his people didn’t return home, there soon wouldn’t be any home for them to return to.”

Rose frowned. “Do you think it really was the W.U.L.F. that was responsible for the attack?”

“It would make sense,” Zane nodded. “They already went after James’ dad and the rest of us once, on the *Zephyr* ride here.”

At that point, the conversation turned to an excited recitation of the travelers’ adventure on the train and the warning issued by the W.U.L.F. leader immediately before he flew away. Finally, Rose shook her head thoughtfully.

“And yet it wasn’t the W.U.L.F. leader you saw coming out of the Archive after the attack,” she mused. “It was Petra and some other woman, right?”

“Unofficially, yes,” Zane agreed. “According to Merlin’s version of the story, we just saw two women leaving the Archive. He seemed to want to keep Petra’s part secret.”

From the other side of the Shard, Scorpius asked, “Why would he do that?”

“He said something about it to me afterwards,” James admitted, shuffling his feet. “He said... that it was important that he choose his battles wisely, whatever *that* means. He talked to Petra himself after the whole thing was over, right before he left. And then he came and talked to me. He said that it would be best if we kept what we knew to ourselves since the Americans wouldn’t have the... er... *facilities* to properly handle any investigation of Petra. That’s exactly how he put it, but I don’t know what in the world he meant by it. And then he asked me, along with Ralph and Zane, to keep an eye on her, for him.”

“He knew that she was involved in the attack on the Vault and he just let her go?” Rose said skeptically. “Pardon me for saying so, but that seems extremely odd. What did he want you to watch out for?”

James shrugged, looking from face to face. “First of all, maybe she *wasn’t* really involved,” he insisted. “Maybe it was... I don’t know... someone using Polyjuice Potion or something.”

Scorpius sighed wearily. "Potter, your blind loyalty is getting to be a bit of a drag. Isn't this exactly like what happened last year, when you refused to admit that you saw the Headmaster in the Magic Mirror, consorting with villains?"

James' face heated. "I ended up being right, didn't I?" he replied. "I mean, sure, it *was* Merlin, but he hadn't gone all evil. And neither has Petra."

Rose waved a hand impatiently. "So what are you supposed to be watching out for with Petra?"

James sighed. "Anything... out of the ordinary, I guess. Merlin didn't get specific. She's gotten herself an apprenticeship position here at the school, working with the Potions Master, so we'll be seeing her at least twice a week. Merlin must trust her because he helped get her the post."

Scorpius looked thoughtful where he sat on the sofa next to Rose. "Maybe Merlin got her the post *in order* to make it easier for them to keep an eye on her."

"Why wouldn't he just bring her and Izzy back here with him?" Rose asked, looking aside at the boy next to her.

"Maybe he can't," Scorpius answered simply.

"Wait a minute..." Zane said, narrowing his eyes. He leaned forward and peered critically into the Shard, his face contorted in the comic half-grin that marked his version of deep thought. "Are you two... dating?" he asked suddenly.

Rose's eyes widened and she glanced at Scorpius, who looked back at her sideways. There was a long pause.

"I knew it!" Zane cried, pointing at the Shard.

Rose's face went red. "Don't be ridiculous. We're just friends. And we're both not even thirteen years old, if you recall."

"*Rose* has a boyfriend," Zane sang, grinning.

Scorpius rolled his eyes and climbed to his feet on the other side of the glass. "I have Runes homework," he stated in a bored voice, walking away.

"You're all idiots," Rose fumed, crossing her arms and refusing to make eye contact with the boys in the mirror.

"That may be," Zane nodded, still grinning, "but we're *perceptive* idiots. Aren't we?" He glanced back at James and Ralph. Ralph shook his head.

"I have Mug-Occ homework," he said, turning to his bed, which he threw himself on.

"See you later, Rose," James smiled. "I expect Scorpius could use some help with his Runes."

"Scorpius does just fine on his own," she muttered, standing up. "Let me know what else happens there, all right? And bring Lucy with you the next time you pop on. Maybe we'll get some *intelligent* conversation out of *her*."

As the final day of Ralph and James' first full week at Alma Aleron finally came around, James found himself looking quite forward to the weekend. Now that Merlin and Professor Longbottom had gone home and his parents and sister were busy getting themselves settled into their new flat, it was going to be James' first chance to enjoy a few days of freedom. There was still quite a lot of the campus that he had not explored, including the inside of the Tower of Art, the strange ruin at the northern end of the campus, the massive sports stadium (known as Pepperpock Down), and the endless statues, fountains, and odd magical landmarks that dotted the grounds.

Lucy had promised to take the boys on a tour of Erebus Castle, home of Vampire House, but James was rather less interested in that, having already had Cursology class in the large glassed 'moonroom' of the castle and not particularly liking what he'd seen. Hogwarts castle was the real thing, of course. By comparison, Erebus Castle felt a bit like a Muggle movie set, with baroque chandeliers crammed into every available ceiling space, enormous, morbidly detailed tapestries hung from every stone wall, and far too many suits of armor, gaping fireplaces, and looming staircases. For her own part, Lucy seemed to have quickly come to love her house and her fellow Vampires, even befriending some of the girls whom they had first encountered aboard the *Gwyndemere*.

"Sure, they're all a little melodramatic and morose," she conceded at breakfast on Friday morning, "but they're really imaginative and intelligent. Felicia Devereau makes charcoal rubbings of the gravestones in the campus cemetery. And Druzilla Hemmings writes poetry. It doesn't rhyme or anything, but that just means it's really *good* poetry. Very grown-up."

"Yeah," Zane nodded critically. "And I hear the whole lot of them are making some new clothes for the emperor."

Lucy blinked at Zane, and then shook her head derisively.

"Wait a minute," Ralph said, frowning. "America has an emperor?"

The last class of the morning turned out to be Theoretical Gravity, which was apparently a strange mix of levitation, flight, and anything else that dealt with getting things off the ground. The class met in the center of a grassy quadrangle between the Tower of Art and the Administration Hall and James was delighted to see the Trans-Dimensional Garage pitched nearby, its canvas walls flapping in the breeze. The flying cars sat inside, their chrome glittering as the sun angled into the tent's open front.

"Is that the permanent home of the American side of the Garage?" James asked Zane.

Zane glanced back at the tent-like structure. "Yeah, I think the other side is somewhere in Pakistan right now. There's a team of wizarding archeologists there, digging up some old magical city. Professor Potsherd is always dragging his students all over the world, scratching around in the dirt like a bunch of beetles. In fact, beetles are all they brought back with them last time. Scarabs, actually, from Egypt. Pretty cool, now that I think of it. They're up in the museum on the top floor of the Tower of Art."

As Zane spoke, a figure strode out from beneath the huge trees at the edge of the quadrangle and James was surprised to recognize Oliver Wood, dressed in a short cape and boots with a pair of goggles pushed up over his eyebrows.

"Greetings students," he proclaimed, summoning them to gather around him in the sunlight. "Professor Asher is feeling a bit under the weather today, so I've been asked to fill in. I am given to understand that you are currently working on intermediate airborne traffic regulations, yes?"

There was a collective moan as the students slumped.

"Come on," one of the Igor boys complained. "Asher's sick. Can't we do something other than aerial right-of-way drills? Let's do a collective levitation!"

"Nosedive recovery practice!" a Zombie girl called. "From a thousand feet! It's clear enough today!"

The class broke into a babble of unruly voices as Wood shook his head and raised his hands, palms out.

"Look, you lot, just because your professor's sick, doesn't mean we can just ignore the curriculum. He'll be back next Friday... er... probably. Actually, maybe not, now that you mention it..."

"What's he got?" the Igor student asked.

"I hear it's witherwart," a Vampire girl called out from the rear of the gathering. Everyone turned to look back at her. She blinked at them. "At least, that's the rumor that's going around. *I* don't know anything about it. It isn't like I cursed him with it just to put off my UP-DWN examination. Er, none of you can prove anything."

"Either way," Wood said, trying to regain control of the class, "it may, in fact, be that the professor could be absent for a few weeks. So..."

The class broke into a babble again, begging to be given a holiday from the regiment of flight regulations they had apparently been studying. Wood glanced over the students a bit helplessly, and then grinned.

"Fine," he called out, silencing them nearly instantly. "We'll run some laps on the Clutch course, just to warm up. After that, we'll go over passing streams and confined space landing techniques."

"Excellent," Zane enthused as the class cheered, drowning out the second half of Wood's statement. "We can get a little speed behind us up in the rings. It's good timing too. The first Clutch match of the season is only a week away."

"So what is Clutch anyway?" Ralph asked as the class followed Wood across the quadrangle, heading for the stadium parapets which were just visible over the roofs of Faculty Row. "Is it anything like Quidditch?"

"Not really," Zane answered, cinching up the corner of his mouth thoughtfully. "Clutchcudgel is sort of a cross between broom racing and rugby. Basically, you have a series of floating rings that form a big figure eight in the air over the field. The point is to catch one of the three Clutches, which are just flying leather footballs, and then zoom three times through the course as fast as you can. On the last pass, you toss the Clutch through the goal over the middle ring."

James shrugged. "Doesn't sound too hard."

"Nope," Zane agreed. "Except for the Bullies. They're the guys on the other team whose job is to force you out of the rings and make you forfeit the Clutch."

Ralph nodded. "All right. But still, assuming you get past them, it's just a straight shot to the goal, right?"

Zane clapped Ralph on the shoulder. "Absolutely. Except for the Keeper. He carries a big wooden Cudgel, and he'll swat the Clutch right back at you if he can. Knock you right off your broom if you aren't careful. Bullies can carry Cudgels too, sometimes."

"And don't forget about the offensive and defensive spellwork," another boy called from nearby.

"Right you are, Heathrow," Zane replied. "The magic game is an essential part of the sport. Which is why the Zombies will rule the course this year."

"In your dreams, Walker," an Igor girl countered. "We'll clobber the lot of you at the first cross passage."

"Cross passage?" James asked, glancing aside at Zane, who waved a hand dismissively.

"Some of the Bullies will hang back during the first loop, just so they can meet you at the intersection and broadside you. You can usually duck under them, and most of them don't really have the guts to perform a true kamikaze."

"Team Igor has *plenty* of guts," the girl grinned wickedly. "We just got a refrigerated shipment of them last Wednesday."

"Gonna whip yourselves up a squad of Frankensteins who actually know how to fly a Clutch course?" Zane asked brightly. "Or are you just hoping to spawn some dates for the Halloween banquet?"

The girl fumed angrily but couldn't seem to come up with a sufficient retort. Zane dismissed her airily.

Shortly, the class entered the shadow of Pepperpock Down, which consisted of a series of tall grandstands surrounding a neatly cropped field. Two wooden gantries faced each other in the center of the field, each topped with a broad platform and hung with house banners. A scattering of students sat in the grandstands, soaking in the autumn sunlight or chatting in small knots. At ground level, a group of college-aged Werewolves ran exercise drills, their grey tee shirts and sweatpants dark with sweat. Wood led his class across the pitch toward a door in the base of the right gantry.

"Grab a broom, everyone," he called, heaving the large door open and revealing a low, dark locker room. "Let's not be choosy. I want to see you all on the platform in five minutes."

James and Ralph were among the last ones into the musty space. The room was embedded into the ground beneath the field and framed in stone, with a low wooden roof. More house banners decorated the inside walls, most quite old and dusty. Hundreds of brooms were hung on

pegs or stashed in large quivers. Babbling noisily in the cramped space, the students chose a broom each and began climbing a set of narrow stairs that spiraled up through the ceiling.

"Whoa," Ralph said, nudging James and pointing. "Look at those!"

James whistled appreciatively as he moved toward a set of shelves beneath the stairs. "Are those brooms? I've never seen anything like *that* before."

The objects lined neatly on the shelves were as long as brooms, but much flatter and wider, like fence planks that had been smoothed and polished. Their tails were streamlined and flattened, each bristle honed to a needle-like point. Some had been painted with garish designs and colours. They gleamed mellowly in the dusty light.

"Are we allowed to use these?" James asked, wide-eyed.

Ralph shrugged and grinned. "I don't see why not. I'd ask Zane, but he was one of the first ones up to the platform. Come on, let's give it a shot! They sure beat the house brooms back home!"

James nodded. Almost reverently, he picked up the closest of the strange brooms. It was painted glossy black with blue flames streaming from the front. Ralph took the one next to it, which was streaked with orange and black like a tiger's stripes. Held upright, each broom was slightly taller than they were. After a moment's admiration of themselves with their impressive brooms, both boys turned and followed the last of the class up into the open-air staircase.

A minute later, much out of breath, they climbed into the brightness of the platform high over the field. The grandstands didn't seem so very tall anymore as they ringed the field. The campus sprawled away into the hazy distance, topped by the bell tower on the roof of Administration Hall, which was the only thing higher than the stadium platforms. Glittering in the air over the field, James saw the rings that formed the Clutchcudgel course. The one in the middle was larger than the others, and topped with a second ring, smaller and shining silver—obviously the goal ring. A line of pigeons perched atop of the goal ring, watching the students where they gathered on the platform.

"All right," Wood said, clapping his hands together briskly. "Let's stretch our legs a bit, shall we? Three warm-up laps should do the trick. This isn't a competition, so let's avoid passing each other. Leaders cross on top at the intersection, followers keep below. Understood? Then let's be off."

With a curt nod, Wood straddled his own broom and kicked off, bobbing up into the air and passing through the nearest of the floating golden rings. The thought of taking off from such a high perch gave James a vaguely queasy feeling, but none of the other students seemed the slightest bit nervous about it. Like dandelion seeds in a breeze, they streamed into the air, following Wood as he navigated serenely through the course.

"Well," Ralph said, hefting his broom so that it bobbed next to him, "here goes nothing."

Both boys attempted to straddle the oddly-shaped brooms and immediately found them rather uncomfortable and awkward.

"Is it just me," Ralph said, bouncing on tiptoe toward the ledge of the platform, "or does something about this feel a little... backwards?"

Most of the rest of the class had already taken off, forming a long line that streamed through the rings, calling out chatter like birds on a telephone wire. Zane still stood on the edge of the platform, waiting his turn as the others launched ahead of him. He glanced back as James and Ralph hobbled into place behind him, and his eyes bulged.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" he hissed suddenly, alarmed. "What are you doing? Get off, quick, before anyone sees you!"

James blinked at his friend and then scrambled to get off of the odd broom. Ralph did the same, but seemed to be rather stuck. He tilted sideways, nearly falling off the broom onto the platform.

"You guys are lucky I'm the only one that saw that," Zane rasped urgently. "If anyone else saw you *sitting* on a *skrim*...!" He shook his head speechlessly.

"What?" James exclaimed in a hushed voice. "Wood said grab a broom! What's wrong with these?"

Zane rolled his eyes and smacked a palm to his forehead. "These aren't *brooms*!" he said, exasperated. "They're skrims! It's an American thing! I mean, *look* at them!"

"So what's the difference, exactly?" Ralph asked, annoyed.

"For one thing," Zane replied, "you don't straddle a skrim. You stand on it. For another thing, they're designed specifically for Clutchcudgel matches, not regular flying around!"

James threw up his hands. "How were we supposed to know? They were right there in plain sight!"

Zane sighed, still straddling his own broom. "Well, I guess there's no rule *against* using a skrim in class. It's just not something anyone *does*."

From across the open air of the course, Professor Wood's voice called out. "Hurry it up, you three! We're one lap down already."

"They've got skrims!" a girl cried incredulously. "I bet they don't even know which end's the front!"

There was a chorus of laughter as the line of students circled the platform, looping back toward the intersection. James watched and they watched him back, many of them smirking and shaking their heads. He glanced back at Zane, who shrugged and raised his eyebrows.

"Well, it's your funeral, mate. Go for it." With that, he kicked off himself, merging with the rest of the class.

"You aren't serious," Ralph asked in a low voice. "Are you?"

"Do they even *teach* flight at that poofy European school of yours?" one of the Werewolf students called out, grinning.

James set his face into a resolved frown, lifted his right foot and planted it onto the beam of the skrim. It bobbed slightly but remained steady.

"He's going to try it!" a girl yelled. "He'll plummet like a stone and bury himself in the field! Maybe he'll take some of those Werewolf upperclassmen with him!" She laughed shrilly.

Ralph raised his own foot and placed it awkwardly onto the tiger-striped skrim. "I can't help feeling like this is a really bad idea," he muttered to himself.

"Buck up, mate," James said. "At least it wouldn't be our first sport-related disaster."

Ralph glanced at him. "Last time I saved your bum. Who'll save *us* this time?"

"Maybe we can save each other. Or maybe this time we won't need any saving."

"So how do we do this?" Ralph asked, swallowing hard.

James shook his head. "I think," he said, steeling himself, "that you just don't think about it."

Before Ralph could respond, James drew a deep breath, coiled himself, and kicked off.

"Wait!" Ralph called out, but James was already gone. The skrim dipped sharply off the end of the platform, with James ducking low over it, and then, miraculously, it bobbed upwards again, wobbling wildly.

"He's doing it!" a voice announced incredulously. "So far, at least. Look at him dance!"

"James!" Wood cried from across the bright distance. "That's a skrim! What are you doing?"

"He's fine!" the Werewolf boy called, grinning meanly. "Look at him! He's a natural!"

There was a smattering of laughter. James struggled to keep his balance on the skrim as it bobbed and slithered beneath his feet, zigging out into the middle of the course. The field swayed far below, looking ridiculously distant and unforgivably hard. He gasped and nearly lost his balance. Instinctively, he closed his eyes, shutting out the sight and concentrating instead on keeping his balance. Amazingly, it worked. The skrim leveled out and ceased its terrible wobbling. James drew a deep breath, bent his knees a little, and relaxed his shoulders. Slowly, he slit his eyes again, keeping them raised and refusing to look down. The line of broom-borne students strung out ahead of him, most looking back with curiosity and surprise.

"Well, I'll be jiggered," a fellow Bigfoot named Norrick announced, smiling. "Look at you, James! You're doing it!"

"He'll go over the side like a brick any moment now," the Werewolf boy called, his grin faltering.

James didn't *feel* like he was going to go over the side, however. In fact, the more he relaxed on the narrow beam of the skrim, the more he thought he understood the way the unusual broom worked. Unlike normal flight, operating a skrim was all about how he angled his feet and maneuvered his center of gravity. These were skills that had come naturally to him on the football field. Maybe the same thing that had made him good with the football would make him good at flying a skrim. Cautiously, he experimented with leaning forward, accelerating slightly. He angled

around the student who flew in the rear, passing somewhat nervously. The student was a girl from Pixie House, her streaming blonde hair tied in an immaculate ponytail. She frowned at him with disbelief.

"No passing, please," Oliver Wood called from the opposite end of the course. James glanced aside at him as he flew, slowing slightly.

"Beginner's luck," the Werewolf boy proclaimed, looking back at James over his shoulder, his eyes narrowed. "Try that during a *real* match and see what happens."

James ignored the boy. He glanced down at himself, surprised at how well he was doing. Some part of him had suspected that he might actually be able to manage himself on a skrim. He hadn't known why, but now he thought perhaps he did. Potters were born flyers. He'd never understood it before, but then again, he'd never been given the opportunity to fly like *this* before. It felt perfectly natural, as if the skrim was simply an extension of his own body. Experimentally, he tried a little shimmy, and felt the board carve effortlessly back and forth beneath him, cutting the wind like a knife. He began to speed up again, passing the Werewolf boy.

"He's gonna lap you, Pentz!" another boy called from across the course. "The newbie's gonna show you up!" There was a hoot of laughter.

James saw the look in the boy's eye a moment before the grey-gloved hand lanced out. The Werewolf boy, Pentz, meant to smack the skrim as it passed him, knocking James off balance. Instead, his hand missed cleanly as James tilted his ankles, dodging momentarily out of the boy's reach. Both of them blinked in surprise. Pentz's face turned ugly, and he lunged out again, meaning to catch the end of James' skrim. James feinted away again, marveling at how easy it was. Pentz was growing furious. He lashed out again, lunging on his broom, and nearly rolled it over as James dipped down and away, grinning.

"Come back here!" Pentz hissed.

"Be careful," James replied. "I'd hate to see you make a crater on the field. But then again, maybe you'd take out some of your housemates on the way."

"No passing," Wood called again. "This just a warm-up exercise, everyone."

James glanced around once more, peering over his shoulder to see where the professor was.

"That's right, Cornelius," Pentz growled. "You can pass me when you're on your way to the dirt."

He lunged out once more, this time with both hands. His fingers closed on air, however, as James dodged up over the boy, and Pentz did roll over this time. He scrambled to grasp hold of his broom as it slewed back and forth, arcing out of the line of flyers. James swooped over Pentz easily, picking up speed. All around, students began to respond, laughing at Pentz as he struggled to right himself on his broom, but James barely heard them. He hunkered lower on the skrim, still accelerating, and threaded through the flyers, now passing them one at a time.

The pure pleasure of flight was intoxicating. It filled him from head to toe, tingling like secret magic. This time, however, it wasn't wizard magic. This was the pure and simple magic of

discovering some innate, hidden talent and finally, wonderfully, finding the means to exercise it. He leaned forward over the skrim, driving it onward, following the line of flying students, beginning to swerve through them like pylons. He didn't hear Professor Wood calling out to him, nor did he hear Zane's hearty whoop of encouragement as James passed him, still accelerating.

This is what my dad felt, James thought happily. The first time he sat on a broom and took it up into the sky, this is what he felt! It makes sense to me now! Now I understand the feeling!

A nearly absurd sense of pride and delight welled up inside James, flooding his heart and tingling all the way down to his toes. He couldn't bear it any longer. Gently, instinctively, he leaned forward. The skrim sped up, and this time James didn't hold it back. He leaned into the wind and dropped out of the rings of the Clutch course, angling out in a wide arc over the grandstands. Students peered up at him as he whooshed overhead, leaning so far over the flat of the skrim that he curled his fingers over its tip, baring his face into the thundering force of the air. He couldn't bring himself to remain in the confines of the stadium, not when there was so much open air out over the rest of the sun-washed campus. With a whoop of joy and a wild lean, he spun off between the grandstands, angling out over the trees.

The bell tower of Administration Hall swayed before him and he aimed for it, slaloming back and forth on the air currents. The wind felt almost like a solid thing all around him. It was as if the faster he flew, the steadier the skrim was beneath his feet, allowing him to lean dramatically from side to side with no sense of vertigo. The bell tower grew large with amazing speed and James swooped past it so closely that he saw his shadow flicker over the conical roof.

Instantly, he tucked and leaned, drawing the skrim sideways into a tight corkscrew turn. James spiraled downwards and banked toward a cluster of huge pine trees. The air of his passage startled pigeons from the trees and dragged a wake of loose needles and twigs out behind him, forming a pine-scented trail into the sky.

He leaned over the skrim again and dipped low over the blur of the campus. Students glanced up as he flashed overhead, pulling a shaft of wind behind him like an aftershock. Still he lowered so that his reflection raced him in one of the long pools that lined the mall. The gargoyle birdbath loomed ahead and James pulled sharply up at the last moment so that he shot through the spray of the fountain itself, exploding it into mist.

Laughing, he angled back again, rising and slowing, breathing a deep sigh of elated excitement. The campus unrolled beneath him until the stadium heaved into view once again, waiting for him. The rest of the class had finished their laps. They stood dumbstruck on the platform, holding their brooms at their sides, watching as James swooped expertly over them, lowering. Ralph and Zane stood on the edge of the platform, grinning madly and shaking their heads in wonderment. The small crowd opened beneath James, giving him room to touch down. Before the skrim touched the platform, James jumped nimbly off it, landing easily and collecting the skrim as it bobbed up alongside. He panted giddily, shook fountain water from his hair, and looked around at the class.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Wood called out sternly. James glanced around, and the smile dropped suddenly from his face. Wood's face was taut with severity. "I have exactly two questions

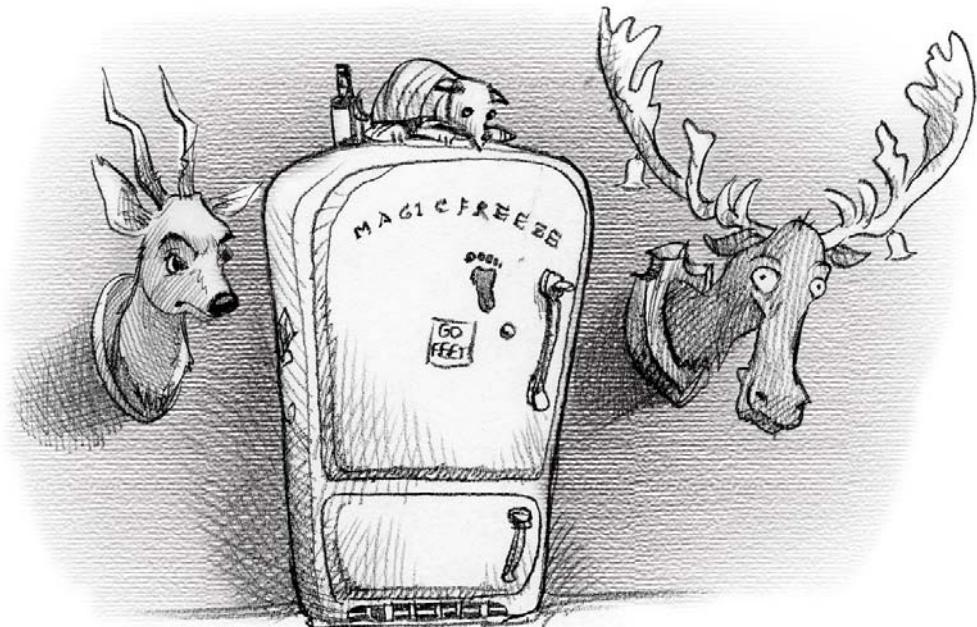
for you, young man. The *first* is what detention do you prefer? Writing lines or scrubbing bathroom floors?"

James' face fell. "Er. Um," he stammered. "Writing lines, I guess?"

Wood nodded slowly. "Writing lines it is. See me in my office this evening."

James sighed. "Yes sir. Sorry. What's your second question?"

Wood's face turned very slightly thoughtful. James had the sudden sense that the professor was trying very hard to suppress a smile. In a more conversational tone of voice, he asked, "What size jersey do you wear?"



11. *JARDIN D'ÉDEN*

Professor Wood's Bigfoot office consisted of a small space in the corner of Apollo Mansion's basement game room. A single rickety desk sat near the giant old refrigerator, overlooked by the stuffed heads of Heckle and Jeckle. Both heads were awake and listening intently as Wood gave James his line-writing assignment.

"It's the principle of the thing, really," Wood said apologetically. "I can't be seen to go easy on you, James, especially if you are going to play for the Bigfoot Clutch team. A hundred lines should suffice."

"This isn't really lines, Professor," James said tentatively, looking down at the small booklet in his hand. The cover was grey with tarnished silvery letters embossed onto it, reading, 'Official Rules and Regulatory Overview of the Sport of Clutchcudgel by Quincy Dirk Triplington, Commissioner, United States Parochial Clutchcudgel League'.

"Lines are lines, cadet," a voice bleated nearby. James glanced up to see Heckle, the deer head, studying him severely. "May as well make them useful, eh?"

"Who are you talking to?" Jeckle, the moose head, inquired, raising his chin and bobbing back and forth on his short neck. A bell jingled faintly from where it hung on his antlers. "I can't see. Somebody replaced my glass eyes with ping pong balls again."

James saw that the moose head's eyes had indeed been replaced with a pair of large white balls, each hand-decorated with a cartoonish bloodshot pupil. He grimaced uncomfortably.

"Jekle's right," Wood replied, sighing briskly. "No sense copying down meaningless repetitions. One hundred lines from chapter one, 'An Introduction to the Game', should do quite nicely."

"I'm Heckle," the deer head corrected tartly. "*He's* Jekle."

"*I'm* Jekle," the moose head agreed blindly, its bulging eyes peering in two different directions. "Who are you talking to?"

"This new cadet whose unnatural flying skills are going to give us a fighting chance in this year's tourney, you big antler-brain. Pay attention, why don't ya?"

"You know, you've been a real grump ever since they turned your body into stew," Jekle sniffed, turning away.

"I don't even *remember* having a body, you nappy-furred sawdust-head," Heckle groused. "But at least *I* was tasty enough to eat. I hear they used your body for a big doorstop, but threw it out because it kept farting every time the door hit it."

"Anyway," Wood interrupted, turning back to James.

"I keep telling you," Jekle insisted loudly, "I still *have* my body. It's just stuck on the other side of this stupid wall! If only I could break through, you'd see!" The moose head thrashed and grunted weakly.

Heckle rolled his glass eyes. "Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, Moosey."

"*Anyway*," Wood said again loudly, throwing a warning look at the stuffed heads on the wall. Jekle, of course, missed the look, and continued to twist back and forth, kicking his nonexistent legs. Heckle peered back at Wood with his brows raised challengingly, as if to say *what are you going to do to me? I'm already a stuffed head on the wall.*

"Moving along," Wood exhaled, turning back to James. "Clutch can be a rather complicated sport, but you'll catch on quickly since you already know Quidditch."

"Er," James began, glancing around, "I, uh, I didn't really, you know... *play* Quidditch. Official-like. As such."

Wood frowned. "What do you mean? You're on the Gryffindor team back home, right?"

"Not really *on* the team, exactly," James answered miserably. "I mean, I support the team, of course. From a distance. I, er, planned to make the team this year."

"But the way you flew...!" Wood said, shaking his head in wonderment.

"It's skrim-specific," Zane clarified from over a nearby couch, where he was watching with interest. "Trust me. I've seen James in action on a regular broom. Not bad, but not what anyone would call a broom wizard. So to speak."

"I saved him from certain doom the first time he tried out for the team," Ralph grinned from his place next to Zane, holding up his huge green-tipped wand. James rolled his eyes and glared back at his friends.

"Well then," Wood replied airily. "No matter, of course. You're quite keen on a skrim, which is the important thing. We can verse you on the specifics of the game over the next week, and your lines will help. We field a solid team, if I do say so myself. You may be just enough to push us over the top this year."

Zane screwed up his face in an effort not to laugh.

"We'll put you Zombies in your place!" Norrick announced brashly from a nearby easy chair.

Jazmine, the rather portly Veela, sat across from him. "Er, in the nicest possible way, of course," she said, and grinned sheepishly at Zane.

"It takes more than excellent flying to win at Clutch," Zane said lightly, not meeting Norrick's eyes. "Zombie's magic game is going to be especially strong this year. What do you Bigfoots have planned in that department?"

"Wouldn't *you* like to know!" the small boy, Wentworth, interjected from his own chair, sitting up straight and puffing out his narrow chest.

"I sure would," Zane agreed with a smile. "And I bet *you* would too!"

"Enough, Mr. Walker," Wood sighed. "Let's keep the trash talk on the course. Bigfoot House prides itself in an honest game, pure and simple. Good fundamentals are our primary strategy."

Zane shrugged and flopped low onto the sofa so that only the top of his head was visible. "That's done wonders for you so far," he said in a muffled voice.

"Tomorrow is Saturday," Wood announced, ignoring Zane. "Let's meet at Pepperpock Down after breakfast, shall we? We'll give you a crash course on the basics of the game before the official practice begins. You'll be up to speed in no time."

"I'll come too," Ralph smiled crookedly. "And I'll bring my wand. You never know when it'll come in handy."

James shook his head ruefully but couldn't help smiling at the bigger boy. So much for his Saturday off, he thought, but it did feel quite good to be prized as a member of the team. He determined he would do everything he could to master the sport of Clutchcudgel in as short a time as possible. With his help, maybe the team *could* even win the tournament and unseat the reigning Werewolf champions. That would certainly put Albus in his place, if nothing else.

"*All's fair in love and war,*" he muttered to himself as he climbed the steps to his dormitory room, Clutchcudgel rulebook in hand. "We'll see how you feel about it when the tables are turned on *you*, little brother."



As the days passed and James attended Clutch practices with the rest of team Bigfoot, he did indeed come to feel confident that he might help propel the team to victory over the course of the year.

"So now you know about the three positions in Clutchcudgel," Wood explained to him as they walked back from practice one chilly autumn afternoon. "Clipper, Bully, and Keeper. Clippers are the offense, Bullies and the Keeper are defense. You'll notice, though, that you haven't been assigned to any of those positions."

"Yeah, I did notice that," James agreed, walking along with the grey breeze in his face. "I've been playing every part in every practice. But so has everyone else. Even Mukthatch gets pulled out of Keeper every now and then, which I don't understand at all since those Bigfoot arms of his are about as long as broomsticks and as strong as tree trunks. What's the point?"

"The point *is*, on Bigfoot team, everybody is trained to play every position," Wood nodded, looking aside at James. "That way we don't have any weak links. With the other teams, if their star Clipper gets sidelined by an injury or a well-placed hex, the whole team suffers the loss. A team is only as strong as its strongest player, you know. In Bigfoot House, every player is as strong as the others."

James frowned as he thought back on the skills of his teammates. "Which is how strong, exactly?"

"Well," Wood replied, taken aback, "strong enough, at least. Quite solid, if you ask me. The point is, if we lose one member of the team, any other member of the team is prepared to take their place. Even Mukthatch on goal. Harold Gobbins has nearly as good a reach and Jazmine Jade has the strength of any two boys her size, although she'd hate it if anyone knew it. Frankly, though, I'd be hard-pressed to find anyone as solid on the skrim as you are, my boy. You do your old dad proud. Why, I wager you might even beat him, skrim to broom!"

Wood clapped James heartily on the shoulder as they walked and James grinned even as his face flushed. The two walked in silence for a while, passing knots of students as they made their way across campus. Finally, James glanced up at the professor.

"So you knew my dad when he was a kid, then?"

Wood laughed. "That I did. Taught him to play Quidditch, just like I'm teaching *you* to play *Clutch*. Wheels within wheels is what it's like, eh? Fate has a sense of humor."

James was thoughtful. "What was he like as a kid?"

Wood looked down at James. "A lot like you, I suppose. He looked a lot more like your brother, though."

"That's what everybody says," James replied, shaking his head.

"And I imagine you get right tired of hearing it too," Wood agreed seriously. "But to tell you the truth, I see a lot more of him in you, as far as the kind of man you're growing up to be. He was rather intense, but you couldn't really blame him, not after all he'd been through, and what with his family situation."

"The Dursleys," James sighed. "I've heard about them. A little, at least."

"You never see them?"

James shook his head. "Never once. Dad's Uncle Vernon died a few years back, and Dad and Mum went to the funeral. I heard that Petunia Dursley barely said a word to either of them, although his cousin, Dudley, was decent enough. Invited Mum and Dad both to his house for tea after the graveside service. Dudley's all grown up with kids of his own these days. Mum said that it'd be poetic justice like if one of Dudley's kids was a witch or wizard, but nothing of the sort, apparently. His wife was nice, although she didn't know anything about Mum and Dad being magical. She thinks they're insurance salespeople or something. That's what Dudley told her."

"One shouldn't be too hard on them," Wood said stoically. "It's rather a hard thing for many Muggles to deal with us magical folk. It puts their world a bit on its ear, if you know what I mean."

James shrugged. As they neared Apollo Mansion, he spoke up again. "So what brought you here, Professor?" he asked. "To the States, I mean. If you don't mind me asking."

Wood drew a deep breath and looked up at the grey sky. "My parents, actually," he answered on the exhale.

James was curious. "What for?"

Wood looked down at him then, as if weighing how he should answer. After a moment, he sighed again and looked away. "It's a bit complicated, I suppose. On the surface of it, they thought that if they brought me here, I could get a good advanced degree from the graduate school, further my learning, and become a teacher, like they'd always hoped. But that wasn't the real reason for the journey, really."

James waited, but Wood didn't seem to have anything else to say on the matter. Together, they approached Apollo Mansion where it sat like a giant brick beneath the low sky. Wind soughed noisily beneath the eaves and carried dead leaves up into the air. After a moment, James realized that Professor Wood had stopped walking. Curiously, he looked back to see the man standing in the middle of the narrow path, smiling very slightly.

"My parents were afraid," Wood said quietly, lowering his eyes to meet James'. "I guess it's really as simple as that. You probably wouldn't understand it, but it was a frightening time to be a witch and wizard, or even a Muggle, although very few of them knew it."

Wood stopped again and looked away, out over the campus. He chewed on his words for a moment, and then went on. "It was the time of Voldemort's return, after all. No one knew what was going to happen. The Ministry was being taken over by the Death Eaters, and even Hogwarts had come under the thumb of Voldemort's minions. No one felt safe. As time went by, the battle lines grew bolder and more defined.

"My parents... they weren't fighters. They knew that what was happening was evil, but they were afraid. They didn't know what to do. As things got worse, they planned to do the one thing they thought was best. They planned to leave, to escape. I didn't want to go with them though. I wanted to stay and fight. They begged me to join them, but I refused. I was playing reserve for Puddlemere United at that time despite everything, but even more important than that, I was committed to being a part of the resistance along with your dad and the rest of my old schoolmates. When the Battle happened, I was there. I saw Remus cut down by Antonin Dolohov. I remember seeing Fred Weasley fighting like a wild man, even though I didn't see the blow that killed him.

"When it was all over, I was glad to have been there and to have done my part, but I missed my parents. I began to feel I had abandoned them by staying. As soon as I could, I followed them here, meaning to do what they had originally planned for me, to attend university and become a teacher. I found them here, but they seemed... older. Used up, like. They'd read about the Battle of Hogwarts in the American wizarding press, but none of their new friends here quite understood any of it. Very few of their neighbors celebrated the end of the Death Eaters. None of them had been there, after all. They didn't know what had really happened..."

Wood stopped as his voice drifted off, lost in the increasingly chilly breeze.

James took a step closer to the professor. "But... why did you stay here, then?"

Wood glanced back at him thoughtfully. He shook his head. "I don't really know. I did go to university, of course, right here, good old Alma Aleron. But when it was done, I just couldn't go back to England. My parents were afraid to lose me again. And what's more, strange as it is, I think they were ashamed of what I'd done. They never talked about it, but there was an attitude here in the States, a sort of confusion about who really had been right and wrong during the Battle. My parents had begun to think the same sorts of things. They'd forgotten how it had really been. They never talked about my part in the fight, and if I ever brought it up, they'd avert their eyes, like I'd said something taboo. I stayed because... I wanted them to know the truth."

James didn't quite understand Wood's words or what had really happened with his parents. He asked, "What *was* the truth?"

Wood blinked at him. "Why, that what I did was right. That it was a fight worth fighting. That I'd done the right thing."

James nodded slowly. "Do they know that now?"

Wood looked away again. "My parents both died years ago," he said blandly. "Whatever truth there is to know, they know it now, I suppose."

James wanted to ask why Wood still chose to stay now that his parents were dead, but the professor seemed to be done talking. He smiled rather stiffly at James and clapped him on the shoulder, less enthusiastically this time. "Come along, James. Good practice. I should let you get down to the cafeteria while there's still some dinner to be had."

James nodded and followed Wood into the shadow of Apollo Mansion. Deep down, he thought he did understand why the professor had chosen to stay in the States even though his parents had died. James couldn't have put it in words (at least not very easily) and yet the shape of it was clear enough in his head. Wood's parents may have died, but Wood's mission had not. Somehow, James understood that the question wasn't whether Wood's parents believed he had done the right thing by staying to fight the Battle. The question was whether he, Oliver Wood, believed it himself.



On the day of the season's first Clutchcudgel match, James, Ralph, and Zane had an early Potion-Making class. It had been arranged to begin right after lunch, rather than its normal time one hour later, for reasons that had not yet been explained. The Alma Aleron Potions Master was a very tall, very dark-skinned man with an omnipresent grin that tended to have a somewhat unsettling effect on the students who sat beneath it. His name was Fenyang Baruti and he was apparently from the island of Haiti. He had a very deep voice and a vaguely hypnotic French accent. What sounded haughty and arrogant in Aunt Fleur, however, sounded smoky and deeply mysterious in Professor Baruti. James liked the professor, even though it was rather difficult to know if the man was technically *good*, exactly.

"That's just what you *do* like about him," Rose had sniffed from the Shard a few afternoons earlier, sitting on the sofa in front of the Gryffindor fireplace thousands of miles away. "Sounds to me like one of those people who purposely keep their allegiances secret, so to avoid getting pigeonholed into any of the obvious compartments of life. People like that aren't the sort that one can trust when things come to the sticking point."

"Maybe," Zane had agreed from the American side of the Shard. "But they're a lot cooler than the straight up good guys. And they do tend to get all the girls too." He grinned knowledgeably into the Shard.

"That's true," Ralph agreed with a serious nod. "Baruti's got Petra. She's his teacher's assistant."

Rose narrowed her eyes. "I don't think that's quite what he meant," she said, glancing furtively from Zane to Scorpius, who sat in a chair nearby on the Hogwarts side of the Shard.

Unlike Potions class at Hogwarts, Alma Aleron's version was held in a bright airy room halfway up the Tower of Art. The room was bounded by windows which looked out over an ornate but precariously crooked balcony. On nice days, Professor Baruti was known to take his class out onto the balcony, cauldrons, mortars, and pestles in hand, to do their assignments while seated cross-legged in the sun. This, he claimed, reminded him of his childhood in Haiti, when his father and mother taught him the art of mixing potions on the roof of their small house surrounded by the hiss of the wind and the chatter of the birds. The balcony leaned enough that a dropped pestle was prone to roll all the way across the cracked floor and fall the hundred feet to the ground below, which gave the afternoons in the sunshine a certain nervous edge. James was quite sure that when the breeze blew, he could feel the balcony tremble slightly beneath him.

Today, however, a stiff autumn wind and spritzing rain prevented the class from adjourning to the balcony, and James was rather glad. As he, Ralph, and Zane approached the shelves to gather their supplies, Professor Baruti entered from his office door in the corner of the room. Petra followed him, carrying a stack of parchments and wearing a large leather satchel slung over her shoulder.

"You will not need your cauldrons today, students," Baruti called in his smoky accent, smiling even more indulgently than usual. "Today, we will be going on a small journey to view potion-making in one of its purest and most essential forms. You may leave your packs here and collect them upon your return, but do take a seat while Ms. Morganstern hands out your writing assignments. On the whole, I find your works passable, if uninspired. This is not your fault, however, but rather that of your former Potions Masters, whose lack of passion for the subject has, of course, left you equally dull. This will surely change now that you are in *my* class."

"He's probably right about that," Zane whispered. "Last year, I was in Professor Fugue's Intro to Potions. It wasn't just that he was boring. He made us wear safety goggles if we so much as sliced a lemon! It's pretty hard to take the fun out of dissecting an Acromantula for its venom sac, but he managed to do it."

Petra passed in front of their table and settled James' essay before him. The grade at the top of the parchment was printed in red ink: H+. "Slightly better than Humdrum," she explained quietly. "Not bad, considering the class average is Mediocre Minus. Izzy says hi, by the way."

James smiled up at her, but couldn't think of anything to say. She passed him by, continuing to distribute the writing assignments. When she was done, Baruti instructed the class to follow him out into the hallway. Mumbling curiously, the students began to descend the spiral staircase through the Tower of Art's many levels. Along the way, they passed music lessons, magical art classes, and even a wizarding dance class mostly populated by Pixie students in yellow and pink tights. The teacher at the piano stopped playing and glared impatiently as the Potions students clumped noisily

down the stairs in the corner of her studio. A strikingly handsome Pixie boy trembled on his toes, levitating his partner over his head in mid-pirouette, during the pause in the music.

"So where are we going?" James asked Zane.

"Beats me," Zane replied happily. "But anything that gets us out of the classroom for a day is a good thing in my book."

Ralph glanced aside at James as they descended past the dance studio. "Are you worried about this afternoon's match?"

"Not really," James said, his voice betraying his own surprise. "Maybe I'll get nervous later, but for now, I'm just looking forward to it. We've been practicing for most of the week. I'm ready to finally see a match in action."

"I'll be rooting for you this time out," Zane said bracingly. "You're only playing the Igors. Next week you'll be up against Zombie House, though. I'll have to put on the yellow and black for that. No hard feelings."

"What position do *you* play, then?" Ralph asked Zane curiously, but the blonde boy laughed and shook his head.

"I'm a first-string bleacher bum," he replied. "You didn't really think I was on the Zombie Clutch team, did you?"

Both Ralph and James were surprised. "Yes?" James answered, blinking.

Zane laughed again. "You flatter me, both of you. I never got the hang of a skrim. Call me a purist, but when I'm a hundred feet off the ground, I want both hands wrapped around something solid. You air surfers are totally nuts if you ask me. I play for the Zombie Swivenhodge and Quidditch teams, but nobody really cares about them. It's mostly just for fun, *not* that we don't try our best to kill each other out on the pitch. Clutch is where the real rivalries are here at the Aleron."

As the class reached the main foyer of the Tower of Art with its curving bank of stained glass doors, Professor Baruti stopped and waited for the students to gather around. Humming to himself, he dug in the pocket of his colourful, complicated robes. When he withdrew his hand, he was holding a small envelope.

"Miss Worrel," he nodded to a girl in the front. "Perhaps you'd be willing to do the honors. I'd do it myself, but alas, it only works on the breath of a young lady. Many dried potions are tricky that way."

Emily Worrel, a skinny Igor girl with very thick glasses and mousy brown hair, took a step forward. "What do I need to do?" she asked timidly.

"When I give you the signal," Baruti said gravely, holding up a finger, "blow as hard as you can, just as if you were blowing out the candles on your birthday cake. Can you do that?"

Emily shrugged and glanced around nervously. "I guess so."

Baruti smiled again. Deftly, he upended the envelope and poured a fine white powder into the palm of his right hand. Holding it carefully level, he pushed one of the stained glass doors open, admitting the sound of the rain on the steps outside. Holding the door open, he winked down at the Igor girl.

"Now, Miss Worrel."

The girl drew a breath, leaned forward, and blew as hard as she could. The dried potion powder swirled up out of Baruti's hand and flew through the doorway, forming complicated eddies in the wet air. As it merged with the rainy breeze, however, the powder changed. It sparkled and glowed faintly, spreading but not diminishing, forming a sort of dome of light, laced faintly with rainbows.

"A trifle," Baruti admitted with a smile, "but a useful one. Thunder powder mixed with a pinch of leprechaun gold dust. You can mix it yourselves, using the ratios found on page fifty-one of your textbooks." He stepped out under the faintly shifting glow and looked up. No drops of rain fell on him despite the strengthening storm. A moment later he glanced back at the students gathered just inside. "Come, come!" he waved them forward with a laugh in his voice.

Zane shrugged. "Professor Fugue never did *that*," he announced heartily, and stepped out into the rain. James and Ralph followed, and soon the entire class was threading through the wet campus, completely dry despite the increasing rain. A few older students, late for their own classes, ran past with their book bags held over their heads, their feet casting up dreary splashes on the footpaths. Baruti walked sedately, humming to himself again, while the rainbow-laden glow followed overhead, absorbing the rain with a sort of sparkling hiss. The class babbled happily and clustered around Emily Worrel, who grinned sheepishly and shrugged.

"I didn't know I had it in me," James heard her say.

James found himself drifting toward the rear of the group, where Petra walked alone, her leather satchel still slung over her shoulder. She held a large black book under her right arm.

"So do you know where we're going?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Professor Baruti never discusses his classes beforehand. He barely follows any curriculum at all. He hasn't said so, but I don't think he himself knows what he's going to teach from one day to the next. He only arranged this outing just last evening."

James nodded, thinking of the announcement regarding the earlier class-time that had come during breakfast that very morning. "So how is it working out with him?" he asked. "Are you liking being a teacher's assistant?"

"For Professor Baruti, yes, I am," Petra nodded. "He's unusual, but he knows his stuff, and he's more than willing to teach it to me. Potions was never my strongest suit, you know. Other magic... well, it sort of came naturally to me, so it was easy to rely on that alone. Now, though, I'm beginning to understand just how valuable potion-making really is."

"The professor is teaching you?" James asked, glancing aside at her. "Like, outside of class-time?"

Petra nodded. "He's teaching me loads of stuff, not just potions."

James felt a stirring of jealousy. He knew it was utterly stupid, but that didn't make the feeling go away. "What else is he teaching you?"

Petra smiled crookedly at him, as if she was reluctant to admit it. "Well, he's teaching me French."

"*French?*" James blinked, surprised. "You mean, like, the language?"

"Of course, silly!" Petra laughed. "It's his native tongue. I've always wanted to learn it myself. It's a beautiful language and... I don't know. I just always thought it would be neat to learn. Like it might come in handy some day. Didn't you ever think it might be useful to know another language?"

"Er, yeah, sure," James lied, looking away and running a hand through his hair.

Petra sighed and hefted the book that she'd been carrying under her arm. "He has me reading this. It's in French, but since I'm already familiar with most of the stories, it makes it a lot easier to understand. He says it's the way he learned English, back when he was just a lad himself."

"What is it?" James asked, glancing down at the huge leather-bound book.

"It's a Bible," Petra replied, lowering her voice. "*Les Saintes Écritures*. When I was very young, my grandmother would read to me from her big family Bible. I remember those stories even better than I do the bedtime stories my Grandfather Warren told me at night. In some ways, Grandmother's stories were even more magical. Jonah and the whale, Daniel in the lion's den, even Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Or *jardin d'Éden*, as it's called in French."

James nodded. "My Aunt Fleur speaks French," he said, not knowing what else to say. "And so does my Uncle Bill now. He sort of had to learn, like, so he could understand what Fleur and Victoire were saying behind his back."

Petra put the big book under her arm again as they passed in front of the Archive. James glanced aside and saw that there were still a few guards, older Werewolf students in raincoats and tri-corner hats, posted around the entryway. They'd been there ever since the attack on the Vault of Destinies, although James couldn't imagine what they were protecting, considering what had already been done. The Archive custodian, Mr. Henredon, was rumored to have been moved into a secret wing of the campus medical school, where he was ostensibly still frozen solid despite the Healers' best efforts. James glanced back at Petra, curious to know what she thought of the Archive's guards, but she wasn't looking at them. After a moment, in a very low voice, James asked, "Petra, are you still having dreams?"

Petra blinked and looked aside at him. Thoughtfully, she replied, "I'm having different dreams now."

James frowned. "Not the dream you wrote about?"

"No," she said simply.

James walked on for a long moment. Up ahead, Professor Baruti seemed to be leading the class around the ruin of Roberts' mansion, toward the Warping Willow at the far end of the campus. James looked aside at Petra again. "Is there a castle in your dream?" he asked, his voice nearly a whisper. "A big black castle? Sticking out over a cliff?"

Petra looked at James sharply, her brow lowering. "How would you know that?"

James shook his head, not knowing how to answer. "I... think I saw... part of it. By accident. When I touched your dream story." He stopped and collected his thoughts for a moment before going on. "I think that we're still... connected, somehow. Remember the silver thread that appeared when you fell over the back of the *Gwyndemere*?"

Petra's eyes narrowed. "Yes," she answered in a low voice.

James gulped. "Well, I think it's still there, just invisible. I don't know where it came from, or why it happened, but it's... powerful. It's like I tapped into something bigger than myself, somehow, but I don't know what. And now... it won't go away."

"I feel it," she whispered, unsmiling. "But I didn't know you could too."

"I didn't," he replied. "At least not until I brushed your dream story in the bottom of my duffle bag. It was just a glimpse, but I saw something like a giant, ugly castle, all black and sharp. It was sitting on a sort of cliff, sticking right out over the edge, almost like it was holding the cliff up, and not the other way around. I could only get a sense of it all because it was so strong... so, sort of, *heavy*. Is that what's in your dream?"

Petra was still studying James as she walked, her eyes narrowed. Finally, she drew a long, deep breath. "It's just a dream," she answered, returning her gaze to the students marching along ahead of her. "It's not like it was before. Not like what I wrote. Headmaster Merlin told me to chase it down, and that's what I did. I don't have the dream about that night on the lake anymore, the one where Izzy died. I haven't had that dream since the attack on the Archive, in fact. It's like something broke the spell, or changed it. This dream... I can handle."

James watched Petra as she spoke. Her voice was calm, but there was something under her words, something watchful and secretive.

"Petra?" he asked in a near whisper. "Was it you that night? When the Vault of Destinies was attacked? Were you... maybe... sleepwalking?"

"I was in my room that whole night," she answered blandly. "Izzy was with me. We were sleeping. Just like I told Merlin."

"But..." James stopped and shook his head. "I could've *sworn* it was you. You looked at me. And there was another woman... someone I think I recognized from the train..."

Petra's voice was oddly flat. "It was dark, James. Your eyes were probably playing tricks on you."

"Maybe," James agreed faintly. "But... who do you think it was, then? You think it really was those W.U.L.F. nutters?"

Petra raised her eyebrows slightly, and then glanced aside at him, a wry smile on the corner of her mouth. Ignoring his question, she said, "Do you know that this book tells the story of the beginning of the magical world?" She hefted the black tome in her hands again.

James looked down at the black leather Bible. "It does?"

"It does. It says that when God first created people, heavenly beings came down to the earth and fell in love with human women. They took them as their wives, and when they bore children, they were different from other babies. Some grew up to be giants. Others had special powers. They were called the Nephilim. That's where we all began." She tapped the big book.

"Wow," James commented. "I never heard that story."

"It's all right here, in the book of *Genèse*, plain as day. But you know what else is in Genesis? The story of the *jardin d'Éden*. Do you know the story of Adam and Eve, James?" She peered sideways at him.

"Sort of," he answered. "They were the first people God made, right?"

She nodded. "God made them and put them in a perfect garden. They had everything they needed, and there was only one rule. They weren't supposed to eat from one very special tree."

"I remember," James said, recalling the times when his own Grandmother Weasley had told him Bible stories as a child. "The Tree of Knowledge. Right?"

"That's right," Petra replied quietly. "The Tree of Knowledge." She was silent for a long moment, considering.

"But," James prodded, "they didn't listen, if I remember."

"No," Petra agreed, her voice still soft, distant. "They didn't. Eve ate the fruit, and then she gave it to Adam. I've been thinking about that a lot lately. There was only one thing they weren't supposed to do, and she did it anyway. She did it for both of them, and nothing's been the same ever since."

James felt a coldness settle over him. He watched Petra, waiting for her to go on. When she didn't, he asked, "So... why do you think Eve did it?"

Petra sighed again and looked up at the grey sky, past the glimmering rainbows that continued to shift overhead. "She did it because she believed in her heart that it was the right choice. Not only for her, but for everyone else. That's why she ate the fruit, and why she gave it to her husband, and all the rest of us throughout the generations that followed. She wasn't evil. She was just... misinformed. She was doing what she *felt* was best."

James shook his head. "So what does all that mean to us?"

Petra tucked the book back under her arm again and touched him on the shoulder. "It means that we can't just rely on what we feel, James. We can't always trust our hearts. Sometimes, as hard as it is to accept... the heart is a liar."

James was about to ask Petra what this had to do with the dream she was having, the one he had gotten a harrowing peek into when he'd accidentally touched her dream story, but at that moment, Professor Baruti's voice called out through the rain, interrupting his thoughts.

"Everyone gather under the Tree," he said, gesturing toward the Warping Willow. "Huddle in close, under the branches. Pretend you are one big happy family, going on a little vacation. That's the way."

"Where are we going, Professor?" Norrick asked, cramming in behind Emily Worrel. "Don't we need permission slips for this kind of thing?"

"Not far, not far," Baruti replied, ducking beneath the branches himself. "School policy states that parental permission must be acquired for travel of more than twenty miles. We, however, will barely leave the campus. Wait and see, wait and see."

James pressed in under the shadow of the Tree, moving alongside Ralph and Zane. When he turned around, he found himself face to face with Petra. This close to, he noticed that they were nearly eye-level in height. She smiled at him, brushed a stray lock of hair out of her face, and then turned to look out over the campus.

Still humming, Professor Baruti shouldered his way toward the Warping Willow's large gnarled trunk. There, he produced a small piece of parchment and a quill from his robes. Squinting, he peered up at the sky, checked the position of the sun, and then scribbled something on the parchment. Finally, he held up the parchment between his thumb and forefinger and, in a lilting, singsong voice, said, "Warping Willow, wing us hence, day or year or none or all, wend us from this present tense, we who are ephemeral." When he was finished, Baruti turned and, almost casually, flicked the small parchment into a hole in the Willow's trunk.

Just as it had upon James' arrival, the Tree began to shift subtly overhead, as if some otherworldly breeze was pushing through it. The whip-like branches whispered and the lighting began to change in the sky overhead.

"Look," Zane rasped suddenly, pointing past Ralph's shoulder. "The rain! It's falling *up!*"

In front of James, Petra gasped, and then laughed with delight. Sure enough, all over the grey-lit campus, drops of rain seemed to jump up from the ground, leaping into the sky as if to rejoin the clouds. Overhead, the Tree whispered and stirred, and the backward rain grew faster, turning into a blur. Within seconds, James sensed the motion of the clouds, and then that of the sun beyond the clouds as it dipped back toward dawn. Darkness swept over the campus as time began to march backwards outside the canopy of the Tree.

"I never get tired of this," Zane commented breathlessly. Next to him, James nodded.

Petra stood directly in front of James, looking out as the days and months began to march past. Her head moved slightly as she watched the sun turn into a golden streak and the leaves leap back up onto the trees, turning green and lush. Seasons went by and she sighed deeply. James watched her as she watched the view. She was so close to him and yet turned away from him. That was all right though. Without really thinking about it, he raised his hand and very nearly stroked his

fingers over the dark sweep of her hair. Instead, he lowered his hand to her shoulder and rested it there, as if only for support or as a gesture of familiarity. Very faintly, she leaned back against his hand, and he was glad.

Time flew by beyond the branches of the Tree and finally began to cycle back through seasons, and then weeks, and finally days. The sun slowed in its arc and crept once more up into a pristine, cloudless sky. A hot breeze blew in beneath the canopy of the Warping Willow, bringing a scent of wild grass and, unexpectedly, animal dung. With a sort of deep sigh, the Tree went still and Professor Baruti clapped his hands together.

"This way, then, students," he cried. "We have just over an hour and a half before we must return, so let us use it wisely. Good afternoon, Mr. Flintlock."

Petra stepped out into the sunlight and James followed, blinking in the sudden heat. The campus of Alma Aleron University had vanished away, replaced by the small weedy yard with its surrounding glass-topped stone wall. Whenever they were, it felt like the middle of a particularly sweltering summer. All around, students began to strip off their sweaters and blazers and fan themselves in the still air. James could vaguely hear a distant, low rumble.

"What is that?" Zane asked quizzically, peering around and fanning himself with his tie. "Traffic?"

"An airplane?" Ralph suggested, looking up at the untouched blue sky.

"Good day, Professor Baruti," Flintlock the troll said in his slow, gravelly voice, unlocking the gate's padlock. The growth over the gate was even thicker now than it had been when James had first seen it. Swaying leaves and vines completely obscured the view beyond. "Going to visit Miss Amadahy, I presume?"

"Right you are, my stone-hearted friend," Baruti answered jovially.

Flintlock smiled, pulling away the huge padlock while Baruti turned back toward the milling students.

"Attention, class," he called. "Today, you may well learn more about the advanced art of potion-making than any textbook could teach you throughout the rest of the semester. We are about to visit a community that has been simmering magical elixirs for thousands of years and still does so today just as their forefathers did in eons past." Here, Baruti stopped and smiled to himself. "Of course, I mean 'today' in the purely rhetorical sense."

"When *are* we, Professor?" Norrick called out, mopping his forehead with his sleeve. "Since when do potion-makers live in Muggle Philadelphia?"

Baruti poked a finger into the air, as if to say *wait and see*. Then he turned to the troll. "Open the gate, *s'il vous plaît*, if you would, Mr. Flintlock."

With one huge stony hand, Flintlock gripped the gate and pulled. There was a sustained ripping sound as years of vines and bushes were torn apart, half of the green mass riding the gate inwards as Flintlock swung it open. James had expected to see the residential street of Philadelphia outside the gate, but like the campus of Alma Aleron University, the street seemed to have vanished.

In its place was a vast, uninterrupted prairie, dotted with trees and carpeted with tall, shushing grasses. A multitude of brown humps seemed to be swimming through the grasses in the hazy distance.

"No way," Zane said as a huge grin spread across his face. Along with the rest of the class, the three boys pressed toward the gate, eager to see the entire view beyond. As James passed through, he found himself standing atop a low hill that overlooked miles of sunny valley. The river sparkled in the distance, snaking toward the horizon. James now recognized the brown humps in the grass as buffalo. An enormous herd of them followed the curves of the river, tossing their great shaggy heads and kicking up a cloud of dust that hovered all around them.

"Well," James said, nudging Zane, "you said you thought that that rumbling sound was traffic. You weren't too far off."

"Wicked!" Ralph said suddenly, turning. Both James and Zane followed his gaze. In the near distance, spreading away from the base of the hill upon which stood the Alma Aleron gate, was a teeming Native American village. Hundreds of buff-coloured conical tents poked up from the grass, each decorated with colourful symbols and shapes. Trails of white smoke drifted into the sky from dozens of small fires, most tended by dark-skinned men with bare chests and long, neatly braided black hair. Children and women milled throughout the village as well, stretching buffalo skins, pounding grain in wooden bowls, or simply sitting cross-legged around the fires, conducting their councils. A woman was walking up the hill to meet the class, her jet black hair shining in the sun, her short buckskin tunic swishing about her strong legs.

"Good day to you, Ayasha," Baruti called down to her, bowing.

"It is indeed," the woman replied. "I see you received my note about today's lesson."

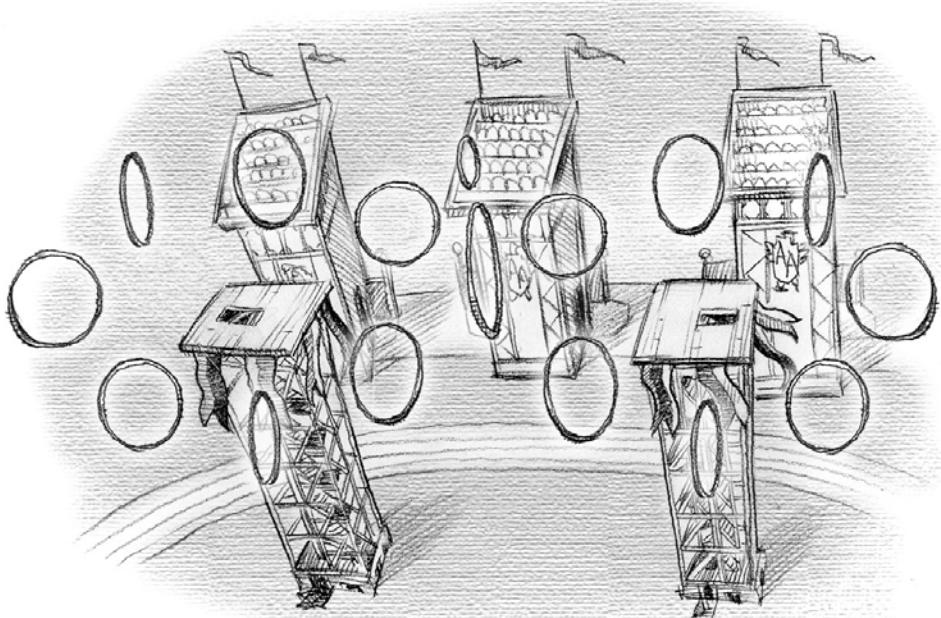
Baruti nodded and spread his hands. "Only last night. The cave paintings grow hard to read after so many centuries."

"It is well that you were able. The Wraithraize is at its ripest and ready for threshing. Come, the pots are already boiling in wait."

"Professor," a Vampire girl called from near the gate. "Is she a...? Are those...?"

"Welcome to Philadelphia," Professor Baruti announced expansively, turning back to the class and smiling, "*before* it was Philadelphia. This is Shackamaxon, the largest extra-temporal, unplottable Indian reservation in North America."

Next to James, Ralph let out a long low whistle. "Wow," he said slowly, his voice filled with awe. "Rose Weasley is going to be *sooo* mad."



12. GAME MAGIC

That evening, the Administration Hall cafeteria buzzed with the anticipation of the season's first Clutchcudgel match. As James waited in line with his tray, he looked around at the packed tables and milling students, most of whom were decked out in sweaters or scarves bearing their house colours, some even with their faces painted. Most prominently displayed, of course, were the acid green of the Igors and the autumn orange of the Bigfoots. To James' surprise, the Igors were apparently considered the stronger team, thus most of other houses had donned the Bigfoots' orange and blue, rooting for the team that they believed would be an easier victory for their own teams when the time came.

Many upperclassmen and college-aged students had turned out in the cafeteria in preparation for the evening's match, showing just how seriously the population of Alma Aleron took the sport. Realizing this, James finally began to feel a stirring of nervousness. He ate very little and then excused himself quickly, darting alone back to Apollo Mansion to grab his jersey and glasses.

He hated wearing the black-framed spectacles most of the time, but tonight, being able to see at distance while navigating the figure eight course was going to be essential. One thing he'd learned during practices was that at skrim speed, things that were far away got close very quickly. This was especially true at the intersection, where two directions of players passed at lightning speeds.

Apollo Mansion was completely deserted and as James left the building and heard the front door slam behind him, he felt a moment of panic. Was he late? Had the match already begun? He glanced up at the clock tower over Administration Hall and breathed a shallow sigh of relief. He had

thirty minutes. Simultaneously nervous and excited, James ran across the campus, heading toward the glow of the stadium parapets and the increasing roar of the crowd.

It had stopped raining, fortunately, but as evening descended, the sky was very low and dark, churning slowly and spawning a capricious, gusty wind. Leaves scarpered across the dark footpaths like startled ghosts, highlighting the eerily empty campus. When James turned the corner at Faculty Row and came in sight of Pepperpock Down, however, he stopped in surprise.

The stadium's high parapets glowed colourfully against the low purple sky, filled nearly to overflowing with a sea of gathering students, waving banners, and high, streaming flags. James gulped. What had he gotten himself into? If he had played on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, he might have been prepared for this. Now, the sight of all of those eager faces, those flapping, handmade banners, signs, and shaking pom-poms filled him with a sort of leaden terror. They were all waiting to see him fly a skrim, to watch him score goals, or—always a possibility—to fail miserably and perhaps even fall to his doom. It was like his first time trying out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, but this time with the entire school watching. If he failed this time, as he had on that day back during his first year at Hogwarts, then he'd never live it down, not in a million years.

He swallowed past a hard lump in his throat, listened to the roar and chant of the crowd, and considered abandoning the whole thing. He could run back to Apollo Mansion and pretend to be sick. It would be easy. The truth was he *felt* rather sick just staring up at those brightly lit parapets and milling, excited faces.

What finally got him going was the thought of his mum and dad. No matter what happened tonight, they would be proud of him. Especially his dad, who had been the youngest Seeker in Hogwarts history. Even if James only managed to stay on his skrim throughout the match, Harry Potter, his father, would be proud of him. Thinking of this, James drew a deep shaking breath and, feeling as if he was walking to his own doom, struck off toward the glow of the stadium. Less than a minute later, he was swallowed up in the roar and momentum of the event and there was no looking back. After that, everything was nearly a blur.



"I thought maybe you'd given the whole thing up," Zane announced, meeting James at the door in the base of Bigfoot team's designated wooden gantry. "I was prepared to find you hiding under your bed back in your dorm room. Me and Ralph were ready to come and drag you here."

"I *told* you today that I wasn't nervous," James protested weakly, ducking through the doorway into the sunken locker cellar. The rest of Bigfoot team moved about inside, strapping on their leather wrist gauntlets and shoulder pads, spitting into their goggles and shining them up with the tails of their jerseys.

"That was then," Ralph replied loudly, following James into the light and noise of the room. "When you left the caf, though, you were looking pretty tetchy."

Zane nodded seriously. "It's normal. Clutch is a brutal sport. Last year, Pixies' best Clipper was knocked off his skrim in the first twelve seconds of the first match! He got hit so hard that his boots landed in the announcer's box, seventy feet away! No one can blame you for being worried."

"You're not helping, you know!" James commented, plopping onto a bench and pulling on his shin guards.

"I know," Zane replied, plunking next to James on the bench. "Which is why I wanted to tell you an idea I had earlier today. It might just help get your mind in the right place."

"He told me about it already," Ralph nodded. "It's... interesting."

Across the low room, Oliver Wood called out, "Goggles tonight, everyone! The wind is picking up something fierce, and we don't want anyone blinded by the mist. I'll perform *Impervius* charms on the lenses once we're all on the platform. Five minutes until warm-up laps!" He turned and clumped up the steps himself followed by several members of the team, who began singing the Bigfoot anthem in husky voices.

"Tell," James said, lacing up his boots. "What's your idea?"

"All right," Zane said, leaning back and studying the low ceiling. "Last year, I had old Stonewall Jackson for Technomancy two-oh-two, which is the intermediate class between Intro to Technomancy and Advanced Applied Technomancy, which we've got this year."

"Get to the Nexus doorway thing," Ralph prodded.

"All right, so last year, Stonewall talked about how there are bunches of other dimensions, all packed together alongside ours like layers in a big giant cake. The attack on the Vault of Destinies got me thinking about it because, apparently, our Loom got switched around with one from some neighboring dimension, one that's a lot like ours, but not *exactly* like it."

"What's this have to do with Clutch?" James asked, harried, as Ralph helped him shrug into his shoulder pads.

"Nothing," Zane said, smiling crookedly. "That's the point! Now pay attention. Back in Techno two-oh-two, Stonewall talked about the theory of this thing called the Nexus Curtain. He said that, theoretically, every dimension has a gate into a sort of middle world, where all the dimensions hook up and hold together, sort of like spokes meeting at the hub of a wheel. This middle place is called the World Between the Worlds. According to the theory, the Nexus Curtain can only be found and opened by someone who has a special key: something from one of those alternate dimensions. Those sorts of things are extremely hard to come by, though, which is why the Nexus Curtain is mostly just a theory and a legend at this point."

"Interesting as this is," James interrupted, standing and patting himself down, "I just don't see the point. Why would anyone want to go to another dimension? This one has enough problems of its own, including surviving Clutchcudgel matches in the dark during a windstorm. Where's my skrim?"

"Right here," Ralph nodded, handing James the blue skrim with the painted-on flames that he had ridden on his first outing.

"Three minutes, Potter!" Norrick called as he pounded up the wooden steps.

"Here's the point," Zane said hurriedly, warming to the subject and following James toward the steps. "According to Jackson, somebody *did* find and open the Nexus Curtain once, somebody from this school, although it was a long time ago. His name was Professor Magnussen, and he apparently went through and never came back."

James pulled his goggles on over his head and seated them awkwardly over his glasses. "Fascinating," he said. "Good for him. Wish I was there with him right now."

Zane rolled his eyes. "You're not paying attention!" he said, punching James on his padded shoulder. "Whoever attacked the Vault of Destinies stole a thread from the foreign dimension's Loom! It's an object from another dimension! Don't you see? It could be used to open the Nexus Curtain!"

James stopped on the stairs and looked back at Zane over his shoulder, his brow furrowed. "So whoever it was... they could have used the missing thread as a key and followed this Professor Magnussen bloke into... wherever he went? They could be... hiding there?"

Zane nodded, his eyebrows raised. "And if they did, then that would explain how the missing crimson thread vanished without any trace! No one's been able to track it down or even sense the slightest hint of it ever since the night the Vault was attacked. That doesn't make any sense at all with something that crazy magical *unless* they used it to escape into the World Between the Worlds! And if that's what they did, then no one is ever going to find them there because no one else has any way of getting past the Nexus Curtain! No one except maybe us!"

"Zane has an idea!" Ralph rasped, smiling crookedly.

James looked from one boy to the other, his brow lowered. "You're both completely daft," he said wonderingly. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Adventure!" Zane announced happily. "Honor, and mischief, and really wild stuff! And maybe saving the universe while we're at it!"

"You can't be serious!" James proclaimed, shaking his head. "My mum was right! You're both suffering from delusions of grandeur! My dad, and your dad, Ralph, and Merlin and all the rest of the best witches and wizards from two countries are working on this mystery, and you two think that they need a trio of school kids to give them a leg up?"

Zane shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time," he replied reasonably.

"If you recall," James said impatiently, "the three of us failed miserably! We were supposed to prevent Merlin's return back during the Hall of Elders' Crossing, and instead we completely fell into Madame Delacroix's trap! We just got lucky because Merlin ended up being good! More or less. The world would probably be a lot better off if we had left everything well enough alone!"

Ralph looked worriedly thoughtful, but Zane was unperturbed. "Worked though, didn't it?"

"*What* worked?" James asked, exasperated.

Zane smiled. "You're not worried about Clutch anymore. Now go! You'll do excellent."

James rolled his eyes, turned, and ran up the steps, following the last of his teammates.



The rest of the night happened so fast, so breathlessly, that James could barely keep up with it. His clearest memory was of standing in the darkness of the platform, looking out over the brightly lit parapet grandstands and hearing the ringing roar of the gathered crowds. Banners snapped in the wind as a misty rain began to fall again, making the platform shine as if it was coated with oil.

"Huddle up, team," Wood shouted over the damp wind. "It's the first match of the season, so let's take it easy out there. I want to see a solid, textbook match, just like we've been practicing. Begin with swallow formation, Bullies in front. Mukthatch, you'll start as Keeper, but be prepared to switch with Gobbins if they stack their Clippers. Got it?"

The team grunted in understanding. Next to James, Mukthatch the Bigfoot nodded his shaggy head and barked a guttural woof of agreement. Wood looked around at the gathered faces, his expression tense, and then stuck out his right hand, palm down. As one, the rest of the team piled their right hands on top of his, Mukthatch last, his great furry-knuckled fingers as big as bananas.

"GooOO FEET!" the team cried in unison, and then broke away, clutching their skrims. In the lead, Jazmine Jade dropped her skrim, stepped easily onto it, and kicked off into the darkness. The rest of the team began to follow her, forming the one-two chain of swallow formation.

James pressed his lips together tightly, swept his damp hair out of his face, and then strode toward the edge of the platform. His heart was pounding as he dropped his skrim next to him. He'd done this dozens of times now, albeit never in the rainy dark, and never with so many people

watching. The crowd cheered loudly, echoing in the mist all around, but James ignored them. He nodded to himself, planted his right foot onto the smooth flat of his skrim, and kicked off.

The team circled sedately through two laps of the figure eight course, merging gradually with the members of Igor team, whose short green cloaks flapped wetly in the wind.

"Hey Cornelius," an older Igor boy called, swinging comfortably alongside James on his long silvery skrim. James had learned, after several confusing interactions, that 'Cornelius' was a generic American term for anyone with an English accent, based on a series of famous speeches given by former Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge some decades earlier. "I hope you aren't too attached to that board of yours," the boy said, grinning meanly. "I plan on splitting it in two before the night's out."

"You'll have to catch me first," James replied lamely, avoiding the boy's eyes.

"You'll want to keep an eye peeled when you cross at the intersection," the boy nodded smugly. "I'll be the one meeting you there, and I won't be playing nice. Igors play for keeps."

James grimaced, glancing down at the dark field far below. "I'll keep that in mind."

As the final warm-up lap completed, both teams had spread throughout the rings of the course, mixing and assembling into their beginning formations. Mukthatch hovered on his skrim over the middle ring, crouched and ready with his Cudgel held before him, guarding the goal ring, which glowed faintly in the darkness. The Igor Keeper, a rangy girl with a round, freckled face, flexed her knees on her own skrim, watching Mukthatch out of the corner of her eye.

Flying on a standard broom outside of the course, the match official, Professor Sanuye in a black and white striped tunic, raised a whistle to his mouth. As Jazmine and the Igor team captain crossed the center ring, Sanuye blew his whistle, announcing the start of the match. Three leather balls, the Clutches, spiraled up into the air from three different directions, and the teams instantly fell upon them in an explosion of motion.

James was starting the match in the position of Clipper, but by the time he propelled his skrim through the center ring, all three Clutches had already been collected. He glanced around, crouching low over his skrim, and saw that Norrick had collected one of the Clutches. The other two had been claimed by Igor team. Grimly, James sped up, meaning to catch the Igor Clippers and try his best to knock them out of the rings, thus forcing them to relinquish the Clutches. He was no longer nervous or worried, nor was he afraid of falling off his skrim and embarrassing (or killing) himself. Now, all that mattered was the match. James became lost in the blur of the rings, the whoosh and buffet of the air as he passed by the other players, and the smack and thump as riders collided and spun away into the darkness.

At first, the intersection seemed dreadfully frightening, but soon James came to anticipate it, throwing a darting glance toward the crossing stream to see who might be coming to meet him while he prepared to dodge or feint around them. Eventually, in fact, he saw how he could use the intersection to his advantage, using his speed and maneuverability in a strategic manner. As the match progressed, James began to throw in little false maneuvers to trick the opposing offense into

flying off course or cause them to ram into each other. Dimly, he was aware of the applause of the crowd as he performed these moves, but it seemed far away and unimportant.

By the third quarter, James had grown confident enough to go on the offensive. During one cross passage, he leaned hard on his skrim, performing a perfect barrel roll, so that when he passed through the ring, he was completely upside-down. The passing Igor Clipper was so stunned by the move that James was able to easily jab out his hand, punch the Clutch from beneath the boy's arm, and catch it as it lobbed into the air on the other side. All around, the crowd cheered wildly, leaping to their feet and stomping raucously. Protecting the Clutch with both arms, James swept easily through the course the requisite three times, avoiding the Igor Bullies, and finally lobbed the Clutch toward the goal ring. The Igor Keeper lunged for it with her Cudgel, missing only barely, and James threw both hands into the air, celebrating his first goal along with the grandstands all around.

By the fourth quarter, however, James realized that Bigfoot team was trailing the Igors by a score of forty-six to twenty-nine. This was not because the Igors were better players, necessarily, but because of the very thing that Zane had warned about. Magic was allowed in the sport of Clutchcudgel and the Igors used it quite liberally. James saw them casting defensive spells, such as turbulence pits, Lanyard Charms, and gravity wells, and offensive spells, like inertia enhancers, speed hexes, and accuracy charms. The Bigfoots, on the other hand, used almost no magic whatsoever. James had his wand with him, encased in the leather sleeve sewn into the lining of his gauntlet, but he had no idea what to do with it, not knowing any of the spells he saw the Igors casting.

Finally, as the match neared its end, James grew desperate enough to perform one of the spells that he had learned during his earlier school years. As he circled the course, he noticed an Igor Bully preparing to cast a Lanyard Charm on Jazmine Jade, intending to use it to yank one of the Clutches out of her hands. James sped up, hunkered over his skrim, and swept his own wand from the sheath in his gauntlet.

“*Expelliarmus!*” he cried, aiming for the Igor boy’s outstretched wand. Instantly, the wand sprang from the boy’s fist and spun off into the misty night. The crowd responded with a shocked outburst and a whistle pierced the air nearby.

“Penalty!” Professor Sanuye called out, swooping in on his broom. “Team Bigfoot, non-approved magic. Two minutes in the dock.”

Shaking his head in confusion, James circled out of the course and flew toward the platform. Oliver Wood met him there, scowling.

“What was that all about?” the professor demanded as James hopped off his skrim.

“Magic!” James exclaimed angrily. “The other team is using it! Why aren’t we?”

Wood grabbed James’ skrim as it bobbed into the air. “We don’t play that kind of match, James!” he said sternly. “We’re a team of solid fundamentals and textbook formations. Nothing unsportsmanlike. We may not always win, but we walk away knowing we played a fair match. Besides, that was a *dueling* spell, not approved Clutchcudgel game magic! You’re lucky you didn’t get ejected from the match, and me along with you!”

"It was just a Disarming Spell," James fumed, turning away. "Besides, I might as well *be* ejected. The match will be over before my dock time is over."

Wood sighed, looking out over the match as it sped through its final moments. "I give you points for enthusiasm, James, but you'll need to learn some self-control. We Bigfoots pride ourselves on a clean game. If you can't abide by that, then no amount of flying skills will make up for it."

James simply looked aside at the professor, speechless. Less than a minute later, the final whistle blew and Sanuye raised his wand, summoning the Clutches. Bigfoot team had lost the match by a score of forty-eight to thirty. Both teams broke up and circled around, heading toward their respective gantry platforms while the crowd cheered and jeered amiably from the grandstands all around.

James stepped forward, took his skrim from Professor Wood, and without waiting for his teammates, began to tromp down the stairs to the locker room below.



"But magic is *allowed* in Clutchcudgel!" James exclaimed some hours later, sitting in the corner booth of the Kite and Key along with Ralph, Zane, and several of his fellow Bigfoot teammates. "What's Wood want to hobble us for by banning us from using something that's legal?"

"*Expelliarmus* spells aren't legal," Jazmine Jade grumped, her chin resting on her forearms.

"Yeah," Norrick agreed. "And we *do* use *some* magic. Wood used *Impervius* charms on our goggles, for one."

"We're allowed to use Gummy-Glove Charms when we're carrying the Clutch," Harold Gobbins added. "And Slipstream Hexes to keep our skrims steady on the course."

"Those hardly count at all," James insisted. "Team Igor was using *serious* spellwork out there tonight! Some of that stuff I've never even heard of!"

Jazmine sat up. "Makes sense. They have their own sport-magic coach whose job is to come up with all new Clutch spells. They have to get approved by the match official, but they pretty much always get a pass, so long as they don't hurt anyone."

"It's true," Zane said. "Team Zombie's magic coach came up with a new one last year that froze a player's skrim in midair. Granted, the player was probably going to fall off once his skrim

jerked to a stop beneath him, but that wasn't the spell's fault. We got away with it until that playoff match where half of the players from both teams got into a pileup crash around a frozen skrim. It was hilarious!"

James narrowed his eyes in disbelief. "Hold on. You mean if I had just *told* Sanuye before the match that I wanted to use an *Expelliarmus* spell for defense, it would've been legal?"

Wentworth Paddington frowned and pushed his large glasses up on his nose. "The official Clutch commission doesn't like players using dueling spells during matches," he said with a sniff. "But there are ways to get around it. There's the Knuckler, for instance."

"Makes the opposing player's hand spasm and drop anything they're holding," Jazmine explained. "Works on wands, Clutches, whatever."

Zane nodded enthusiastically. "And don't forget the Bonefuse Hex. Works just like *Petrificus Totalus*, but only on selected areas of the body. Aim for the other guy's arm and he won't be able to do anything with it for five minutes, at least."

James was shaking his head in exasperation. "So basically there's a Clutch-approved version of any sort of spell, with new ones being created all the time. Is that it?"

Jazmine pressed her lips together and nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much it."

James flopped back in the booth seat. "So who's the Bigfoot magic coach, then? I want to have a word with him."

"Wood, I guess," Wentworth answered uncertainly. "Anyone want the rest of my Butterbeer? I can only drink half or else I get the hiccups all night long."

"Right here, Went," Gobbins announced, sitting up in his seat and reaching for the smaller boy's bottle. "I'll teach you how to put away a drink."

Wentworth looked offended. "I can put away a drink just fine. It's Butterbeer I can't take much of. I'm on a special diet, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," Norrick sighed, rolling his eyes. "We know all about it. Yeats hasn't cooked an onion in the mansion ever since you arrived. Makes liver night pretty pathetic. That's why everyone eats in the caf on Fridays, even the upper classes."

"I can't help it," Wentworth mumbled, crossing his arms. "Onions break me out in hives. Garlic's even worse. You don't have to rub it in."

"Maybe rubbing it in would cure you," Ralph suggested, raising his head. "Have you ever tried it? Rub some onions and garlic all over you, sort of like a vaccination!"

"Add a little butter and you got yourself a new Friday night dinner option," Zane nodded. "Grilled Pastington patties for all!"

"Hah hah," Wentworth said dourly. "It's a serious medical condition. You don't even know."

James finished his Butterbeer and stood up, announcing his intention to go have a talk with Wood about the team's woeful lack of a magic game. On his way toward the door, he saw Albus and

Lucy seated at a nearby table, watching a group of older students play an incomprehensible table game called Wizard Foosball. Tiny ceramic men spun on metal rods embedded into the sides of the recessed table, operated by leather-wrapped handles. A small white ball bounced and clacked over the field encased in the table's walls, kicked by the spinning figures. As James passed the table, one of the players spun the rod violently and the ball popped up out of the table. James caught it deftly.

"Nice catch, Cornelius," one of the upperclassmen players called out. "Still got your game face on, eh?"

James glanced back at them and saw the young men smiling at him amiably, nodding with something like grudging approval.

"Give the ball back!" one of the tiny ceramic players cried in a squeaky voice. The others joined in, jeering raucously. James tossed the ball back to the man who'd spoken to him. The man caught it easily but didn't turn away.

"You did good out there tonight, Potter," the man said. James noticed that he was wearing the orange and blue striped sweater of a Bigfoot college student, most of whom lived in the rowhouses behind the theater. "Don't let Wood hold you back, eh?"

James tilted his head at the older boys. "Any of you know why Wood doesn't use any serious magic in the Bigfoot Clutch matches?"

The college students exchanged glances, smiling crookedly. Finally, the one in the Bigfoot sweater said, "Wood's a decent guy, don't get me wrong. Word is, he left his guts back on the Quidditch pitch in jolly old England, that's all."

The other men laughed and shook their heads. A moment later, they returned to their game.

"I'm sure that's not true," a voice said softly nearby. James glanced aside and saw Lucy and Albus moving next to him. "You came close to winning tonight, even without all that fancy magic."

"Nice flying out there, big brother," Albus agreed reluctantly. "I tried out for Team Werewolf, but they just laughed at me. Said that only true-blood Americans get to fight on behalf of Werewolf House."

"That's awful," Lucy frowned. "*And* against school policy."

"Not when it comes to Clutch," Albus shrugged. "Every house gets to make their own rules about who can be on the team as well as how often they practice, what gear they wear, all that kind of thing. I did sneak out to the field and try out one of those skrimms. Let's just say I won't be pushing the issue with my new mates. I *did* make the Werewolf Quidditch Team, though, mainly because they were a man short after their best Beater graduated last year. I'll be facing off against your mate Zane this coming Thursday night. Mum, Dad, and Lil are coming."

James glanced at his brother as they drifted toward the rear entrance of the Kite and Key. "Did you see them tonight?"

"Yeah, didn't you?" Albus replied. "They sat with me in the Werewolf grandstand. Mum covered her eyes most of the time, saying she couldn't bear to look. Dad had his wand in his hand

through the whole match, twitching it every time you went through the intersection, like he was ready to jump up and levitate you at any moment if you decided to fall off your skrim. He was grinning, though, that mad grin he gets when he watches Quidditch matches back home. You know. Like part of him wants to put on the pads, grab a broom, and jump out there with the team.”

James couldn’t help smiling at the thought. “I know what you mean. Are they still here?”

Lucy shook her head. “Your father got some sort of message through his own Shard. His is smaller. He keeps it wrapped up in his robes all the time, just so he never misses anything. After he got the message, he and Aunt Ginny and Lily left right away. They asked me to tell you hello and that they are proud of you.”

“They asked *me* to tell him that,” Albus said, turning to Lucy, who avoided his eyes.

“There’s this thing called double redundancy,” she explained carefully. “They thought you’d forget.”

Albus rolled his eyes. “I didn’t forget. I just didn’t remember it until you brought it up. Nobody can blame me if you beat me to it.”

“I’m heading back to my house,” James announced, pushing open the heavy wooden door. “I’m completely beat.”

Lucy followed him out into the misty darkness. “I’ll walk with you for the first bit,” she said. “I’m heading back to the castle. I have Magi-American History in the morning, and I still have some reading to do for it.”

James grunted amiably and struck off along the footpath next to Lucy. After a moment, she spoke again.

“For a giant, that Professor Bunyan is one sharp bloke, isn’t he?”

James shrugged. “I guess. Seems like he comes from a completely different tribe of giants, doesn’t it?”

“He says he isn’t part of a tribe at all. He says he just grew big because when he was a lad he ate twenty chickens and fifteen dozen eggs a day.”

“And drank the milk of ten cows and swam laps around Lake Erie for exercise until the whole lake turned into a giant whirlpool,” James nodded, smiling. “You believe any of that?”

Lucy shook her head. “I think those are what the Americans call ‘tall tales’. They’re sort of like a mix between a myth and a legend.”

“I like the one about the magic fog that sprang up around George Washington and his little army of farmers and kids back during the war for independence; the one that hid them from all those huge British warships that were looking for them.”

“I think that one was true,” Lucy suggested uncertainly. “Although it’s hard to know what’s myth and fact about the Americans’ history. So much of it seems so... unreal.”

James raised his eyebrows in the darkness as they walked. "I don't know about history, but it still feels pretty unreal to me, even now."

Lucy laughed, but there was something odd about the sound of it. James glanced aside at her.

"What's up with you, Lu?" he asked.

She looked at him, and then glanced quickly away. "Nothing. What do you mean?"

James looked out over the campus. "We passed the footpath to Erebus Castle back there by the Octosphere, you know."

Lucy gazed back the way they'd come. "You're right," she agreed. "Silly me. Er, I guess I'll head back then. Goodnight James."

James watched as Lucy smiled at him in the darkness, and then turned and ran back along the wet footpath. Her black hair bounced around her shoulders and shone in the light of a nearby lamppost. When she reached it, she glanced back, saw him watching, and stopped.

"You did really well tonight," she called out after a moment's pause. "I was proud of you for trying to use magic even if it did get you into trouble."

James blinked at her. He opened his mouth to thank her, but before he could, she spun on her heels and ran into the darkness, following the narrow flagstone path to Erebus Castle. James closed his mouth again and watched Lucy's silhouette vanish into the shadow of the trees. What in the world had gotten into her? Shaking his own head, he turned and walked the rest of the way to Apollo Mansion.

He was exhausted and a little frustrated, but he was also filled with a certain giddy contentment. He had done well tonight. His mum and dad were proud of him. And he had succeeded in playing for his House Clutch team while Albus had not. That last was a petty satisfaction, but it was satisfaction nonetheless. All that remained was the perplexing mystery of Professor Wood's reluctance to use serious magic in Clutch matches, but James thought he could probably work that out. Even now, remembering the conversation he'd had with the professor some days earlier, he thought he could begin to grope around the edges of it. It was still hazy, but it had something to do with earning the respect of his dead parents, and maybe even himself. It was complicated, and a little mad, but it made a certain backward logic. If using battle magic had earned Wood the shame of his parents, then perhaps he felt that avoiding it now, even in something as basic as a Clutch match, would help him regain their ghostly approval.

James shook his head. Being a grownup was such mad, complicated business. He was glad that he was still, technically at least, a kid.



Over the course of the following weeks, James never did speak to Professor Wood about the flaws of Team Bigfoot's Clutchcudgel magic game. Instead, he studied the small grey rulebook that Wood had given him for his line-writing assignment, particularly the chapter entitled *Offensive and Defensive Spellwork Fundamentals*. There, he learned the essential magic associated with the game, including much of what he'd seen during the year's first match against Igor House.

As the season progressed, James studied the magic games of the other House teams and found that each house approached their Clutchcudgel magic in a distinct and different manner.

The Igors' team, for instance, used conventional Clutch spells most of the time, but occasionally surprised everyone with a spectacularly creative magical effort, often involving several players working in tandem. Such attempts failed as often as not, but they were always exciting to watch and the crowd always cheered the Igors' bloody-minded grandiosity.

Team Pixie, on the other hand, relied on endless variations of entirely original sport magic, mostly designed by Mother Newt herself. Pixie Clutch magic was almost always pretty, sparkly, and effectively devastating, such as when the team captain, a girl named Ophelia Wright, enchanted the tail of her skrim to produce a stream of tiny rainbow-coloured butterflies. The butterflies were admittedly beautiful, if rather fat and clumsy, so that as the opposing players flew into Ophelia's wake, they found themselves peppered with hundreds of splattering, colourful collisions, mucking up their uniforms and pasting over their goggles.

James spent an inordinate amount of time in the campus library, looking up classic Clutchcudgel magical strategies, often with Zane and Ralph alongside him. Secretly at first, James began to practice the offensive and defensive spells he was learning, using the bust of Sir Pepperpock in his dormitory room as a target. Often, Rose, Scorpius, and even Damien Damascus and Sabrina Hildegard would watch James' efforts via the Shard on the back of his dormitory room door.

"You're still emphasizing the second syllable of the Lanyard Charm," Rose announced critically on one occasion. "It's causing it to pull short too soon."

"And more twist in the wrist," Damien added, mimicking the move with his own wand on the other side of the Shard. "See? You're looking for a nice spiral. Keeps your aim true."

James ran his forearm across his brow. "Don't you lot have homework to do?"

"You forget that it's a lot later here," Rose sniffed. "We're only staying up because you're so endlessly entertaining. It's better than telly."

"Do the gravity well again," Sabrina suggested brightly, the quill bobbing in her hair. "I read that people who are really good at it can make one so strong that even light can't escape it! It's like a little miniature black hole!"

Ralph was lying on his bed surrounded by a collection of quills, parchments, and snacks. Glancing up from his Magi-American History textbook, he asked, "How do you all know so much about Clutchcudgel anyway?"

"Library," Rose shrugged. "There's not a whole lot there, but we found a few old magazines that talk about it. Apparently, there *is* a Clutch league in England, although hardly anyone's ever heard of it. I read an interview with the man who runs the league. He's rather... intense. But there was some good discussion of the basic magic that goes along with the game. Have you been practicing that Whistle-Whoopsie Hex Damien came up with?"

"I *told* you," James said, lowering his wand, "we're not allowed to use spells that hurt other players. Making the referee swallow his own whistle is a pretty obvious penalty."

"Can't be a penalty without a whistle blow," Zane mused from his lounge on James' bed. "Right? If a foul is committed but there's no whistle to call it, is it really a foul?"

"That's what I've been trying to say!" Damien exclaimed from the other side of the Shard.

"Forget it," James announced firmly. "I'm not risking getting put in the dock again."

"You mind if I steal that Whistle-Whoopsie bit, then?" Zane asked brightly. "I bet Warrington could put it to good use."

James rolled his eyes. On the other side of the Shard, Damien Damascus pointed a finger. "I've got patent pending on that one, Walker! Don't you go stealing it and calling it your own!"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Zane said in a wounded voice.

By the third match of the season, James had finally grown confident enough to attempt some real Clutch magic during the game. He waited until the fourth quarter of the match against Vampire House and, when he was sure Professor Wood was busy calling out formations, attempted a Lanyard Charm on the Vampire Clipper ahead of him. It worked perfectly. The Clutch popped instantly from beneath the boy's arm and bobbed backwards in the air. James caught it against his chest, surprised and delighted at how simple it had been.

The crowd responded with a rather surprised cheer, and as James zoomed through the intersection and around the Bigfoot platform, he saw Wood glancing around curiously, looking to see what the crowd was applauding. As James neared the end of his requisite three laps, he saw that two of the Vampire Bullies had assembled ahead of him, preparing to fall upon him and force him out of the course. James narrowed his eyes and raised his wand.

"*Cresco Gravitatis!*" he called, aiming for a point between and below the two Vampire Bullies.

There was a very satisfying noise, rather like a reverse popping sound, and the two Bullies were sucked downwards, out of the course. They collided with each other at the point of the gravity well and James was pleased to notice as he swooped past that the air seemed very slightly darker

around the center of the spell. The well collapsed upon itself quickly, but there was no chance that the two Vampire Bullies would catch James now. He banked hard around the last loop, speeding up and crouching low over his skrim, and lobbed the Clutch easily through the goal, keeping it well out of the range of the Vampire Keeper's Cudgel.

The crowd responded with a concussive roar of applause, as surprised as they were impressed. James had harbored hopes that Wood might not have noticed his use of game magic, but this hope was neatly dashed by the echoing voice of the match announcer, a Zombie House girl named Cheshire Chatterly.

"And the Bigfoot magic game takes a rather shocking leap into the twenty-first century with the skillful hexwork of number twenty-two, James Sirius Potter!" she cried, her voice amplified over the roar of the crowd. "Could it be that this hearkens a new era of competitiveness for Bigfoot House? Only time will tell. In the meantime, three cheers for Professor Oliver Wood and his very effective coaching!"

James slowed as he glanced up at the announcer's box, frowning. He was unsurprised to see Zane seated in the box alongside Cheshire Chatterly. The blonde boy grinned and waved down at James, winking, the gesture about as subtle as a giant in a tutu. James tried to avoid Wood's gaze but couldn't help glancing aside as he circled the platform. Wood was smiling rather tightly as the crowd cheered him.

"Nice one, James!" Norrick called, passing James on his own skrim. "Keep an eye out, though. Team Vampire will probably ambush you now since they think you're the only one with any magic game."

James sighed as he crouched over his skrim, accelerating into the intersection. Sure enough, several Vampire players were eyeing him darkly as they swooped ahead.

"Why don't *you* try some magic then, Norrick?" James suggested, raising his voice into the rushing wind. "It's not illegal, you know!"

"I don't even *know* those spells!" Norrick responded. "That was a gravity well! Those are really tough!"

James was about to tell Norrick that they really weren't all that tough, but by then the two of them were zooming into the intersection and he lost sight of the other boy as they flashed and banked through the oncoming stream.

James didn't attempt any more magic during that match, which they lost by a score of fifty-seven to fifty. When it was over, he waited in the locker cellar below the gantry to see if Wood meant to chastise him. The rest of Team Bigfoot congratulated him heartily as they changed out of their pads and gear, but when Wood came down the stairs, they quieted immediately, watching, along with James, to see what he would say. Wood eyed the unnaturally quiet locker cellar for a long moment, letting his gaze sweep over the assembled players.

Finally, he cleared his throat and said, "Good match today, everyone. Well-played. We haven't seen such a close score in a long time. Carry on."

James watched as the professor made his way toward the exit. When the wooden door clapped shut, he let out a deep exhale of relief. For whatever reason, Wood had obviously chosen not to coach the team to perform any serious game magic, but he was apparently willing to allow it if James, at least, took the initiative upon himself. James felt a great weight of worry lift from his shoulders.

"Hey James," Wentworth said, plopping down next to him on the bench, "think you could teach me some of that stuff you did today?"

"Yeah," Gobbins agreed, keeping his voice low. "Me too. I don't know about the rest of these mokes, but I liked what you did out there today. Hell with tradition. I want to hex some heads."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," James said, raising his hands. "I just learned that stuff myself from books. Wood may let me get away with it on my own, but if he finds out I'm teaching the rest of the team to do it..."

"It's not the rest of the team," Wentworth said, wiping his glasses on his jersey. "It's just me and Gobbins."

"And me," Jazmine Jade added, sitting down on James' other side.

"Wurfh," another voice grunted. James glanced up to see Mukthatch nodding down at him, his black eyes twinkling.

James ran both hands through his hair in frustration. "Look, I'm not a teacher. I barely know those spells myself! I just read up on them, watched what everybody else did, and practiced in my room until I was ready to try it!"

"And you did all this *without* telling us?" Wentworth said reproachfully.

"No, no, it's better that way," Gobbins said enthusiastically. "Saves us all the trouble! Now he can just teach us what he knows!"

"I can't teach anybody anything!" James rasped, trying to keep his voice low.

"Why not?" Jazmine asked reasonably.

James shook his head and pursed his lips, at a loss for how to respond.

"Rharrf whubfle," Mukthatch said, giving James an encouraging shove on the shoulder, nearly bouncing his head off the wall.

"Muk's right," Wentworth said. "We're your teammates and your friends. It won't be like you're taking over Wood's job or anything. Think of it as... helping us out with our homework."

"Yeah," Gobbins grinned. "Our Clutch homework."

Jazmine nodded seriously. "We'd help *you* with *your* homework, James."

"You didn't the other night!" James spluttered, turning on Jazmine. "When I asked you to help me with my Precognitive Engineering essay?"

"You didn't want *help* with it," Jazmine replied, rolling her eyes. "You wanted to buy mine from last year. That's hardly the same thing."

Gobbins shook his head. "I *told* you she wouldn't part with it for less than twenty Jacks."

Wentworth stuck stubbornly to the issue. "So, will you help us learn some Clutch magic, James? Just us four?"

James looked from face to face and finally let out a long sigh of resignation.

"Woohoo!" Gobbins announced, throwing his fists into the air. "When do we start?"

"No time like the present," Jazmine suggested. "It's still early. We can meet in the attic common room. Nobody uses that room since Bump the Poltergeist moved into it. He won't bother us, though, as long as nobody minds having a few books thrown at them. Might even help. It'll give us something to aim at."

James leaned forward and stripped off his Clutch boots, letting the conversation roll on without him. Secretly, he wasn't all that upset about the prospect of teaching what he'd learned to a few other players, so long as it wasn't the entire team. He might still earn the ire of Professor Wood, but for the moment, James' aversion to getting into trouble was slightly outweighed by his desire to win at least one Clutch match this season. By the time he and his teammates left the cellar and struck off into the twilight of Pepperpock Down, he was already planning what he'd teach them first.

"Sorry guys," James said to Ralph and Zane as they caught up to him. "No Butterbeers in the Kite and Key tonight. I've been commandeered."

"We figured," Zane nodded, sighing. "You gonna teach your team the old magical twenty-three skidoo?"

"Shh!" James hissed, looking around. "Not the whole team. Just a couple of my mates. Keep it a secret, all right?"

"All right," Zane agreed, throwing up his hands as Mukthatch loomed menacingly over him. "Cool your jets, Chewbacca. Your secret's safe with me. But keep in mind, next week, you lot are up against Zombie House. Magic is their middle name."

"Yeah?" Wentworth countered, pushing himself up to his full height. "Well, Team Bigfoot's middle name is... er..."

"Big?" Jazmine suggested hopefully.

"Big magic," Gobbins nodded. "Thanks to James here. Our new magic coach."

The rest of the Bigfoots agreed heartily, cheering and clapping James on the back.

Zane shook his head and rolled his eyes, smiling ruefully. "My hero," he said, nudging James with his elbow.

James grinned sheepishly.



13. THE OCTOSPHERE AND THE ARBITER

The semester unrolled like a carpet.

James spent a few nights each week teaching Clutch magic to his new friends under the canted ceiling of the attic common room. Bump, the house poltergeist, was quite different than what James had expected. Unlike Peeves, whose gleeful mischief and imp-like appearance were Hogwarts legend, Bump was barely a wisp of human-shaped smoke and a vague scent of mold. His primary method of communication was a variety of sneezes, wheezes, annoyed moans, and the occasional hacking cough.

“Sounds like the ghost of someone who died of the sniffles,” Ralph had commented, a little put off by the roaming, cranky specter.

“It’s a good theory,” Wentworth agreed. “We thought the same thing, so we had him tested. Some teensy old lady from the Medical College came over and took an ecto-sample. According to her, Bump’s a poltergeist, through and through.”

“She sure *was* teensy, wasn’t she?” Jazmine concurred. “Her glasses were bigger than her head. I think she had some dwarf somewhere in her family tree.”

Gobbins poked his wand toward Bump, who moaned irritably and snaked off toward the bookshelf. "She said that there wasn't much point in checking, really," he added. "She said that there hasn't been a real, bona fide ghost at the Aleron for decades."

"Really?" James asked, curious. "Hogwarts is full of them. One of them used to be our History teacher. Why aren't there any here?"

Wentworth shrugged where he sat by the door in an old high-backed easy chair. "Nobody knows. Maybe because of the Timelock. Maybe ghosts just can't keep up with the way the campus roams all over the centuries every day."

"But there *used* to be ghosts," Gobbins countered. "A long time ago. I've heard stories about them. Percival Pepperpock was one of 'em even. And that old janitor, Freddie something or other. He was always trying to scare people, but he insisted on wearing this old stripey sweater and fedora hat, which is pretty hard to pull off even if you *aren't* trying to be all spooky."

"So what happened to all the ghosts then?" Ralph asked.

Jazmine shook her head. "Like Went said, nobody knows for sure. Maybe they just don't make ghosts like they used to, eh?"

Mukthatch grunted and barked, anxious to get on with the lesson.

Things went well enough and James' initial concerns began to wear off. The third time the group met, however, Norrick appeared in the attic common room, having heard about the Clutch magic practices that were secretly taking place there. Grudgingly, James allowed him to stay, so long as he kept the lessons a secret. By the next week, however, two more members of the team had appeared on the long couch beneath the room's single window, grinning eagerly, their wands in hands.

"I didn't tell anyone!" Norrick said defensively as James glared at him. "It's all over the house now. You can't keep secrets very long around here. I even heard Heckle and Jeckle arguing about it downstairs. Heckle thinks we should be learning some tandem spells, by the way, just to mix it up a little."

James sighed. The truth was that he didn't really mind. Team Bigfoot's Clutch magic was coming along slowly but surely, even if it was fairly standard stuff. James sensed that Professor Wood was still somewhat uncomfortable with it, but he had not yet said anything about it. Perhaps this was because the team had not yet won a match, even though the final scores were growing increasingly close. The last match, in fact, had ended in a tie. James had been disappointed to learn that, according to the rules of Clutchcudgel, a tie game translated to a win for whatever team had had the best record coming into the match, thus giving Team Pixie a technical victory. It had been a moral win for the Bigfoots, nonetheless, and there had been raucous celebration in the locker cellar following the match.

As the team carried their good cheer with them back to Apollo Mansion, James recalled his dad's stories about Quidditch at Hogwarts and felt, for the first time, a deep sense of pride that he was living up to his father's image. In fact, according to the old stories, Oliver Wood himself had

been quite the formidable player and had been madly passionate about winning. Perhaps Wood's reluctance to use offensive and defensive magic—whether or not it was rooted in his insecurities about his deceased parents and their disapproval of his participation in the Battle of Hogwarts—was held in check by his much older love of sporting victory. James hoped so. He still had more things he wanted to try.

"All right, you lot," he said, now speaking to slightly more than half of the entire Bigfoot Clutch team, crammed uncomfortably into the attic common room. "That's everything I know. Time for us to get a little creative. Your homework over the weekend is to research something new, something that the other teams will never expect us to know, and come back Monday ready to teach it to the rest of us. Got it?"

There was a rumble of eager excitement throughout the cramped space. Bump lurked by the bookcase with a large encyclopedia in his wispy hand, as if he couldn't choose who to throw it at.

Across the campus, the leaves had all finally drifted from the trees, carpeting the lawns with orange and yellow. The trees scratched their bare branches at the sky as winter settled slowly over the campus, bringing gusty winds and an increasing chill. James broke out his heavy cloak and began wearing it to classes, buttoned dutifully beneath his chin, its stiff collar sticking up around his ears.

"Very dashing," Lucy had said on one grey day, smiling crookedly at her cousin as they made their way toward Administration Hall for lunch. "You'd fit right in at Vampire House. Cloaks are all the rage this year."

"Along with plastic fangs and black hair dye," Albus grumped next to her, walking with his hands stuffed into his blazer pockets.

Lucy clucked her tongue. "You're just mad because you lost the Quidditch tournament to us."

"The tourney's not over yet," Albus countered stridently. "And *I'm* rooting for Zane and his Zombies to beat you all in the final!"

Lucy shrugged as if she didn't care. "May the best team win, of course."

Albus bristled but didn't pursue it any further. James knew that his brother's experiences in Werewolf House were mixed and this was contributing to his natural moodiness. Sometimes, Albus spoke very highly and proudly of life in Ares Mansion. Other times, he seemed sullen and dejected, slinking over to sit with James, Zane, and Ralph in the corner booth at the Kite and Key, rather than joining the long table near the fireplace where the rest of the Werewolves often gathered. Once or twice, James tried to question Albus about his new mates, but Albus always replied defensively, claiming that nothing was wrong, he loved his house, and couldn't a bloke come and sit by his brother every now and then without being grilled about his personal life? Eventually, James gave up asking about it.

Petra still appeared regularly in Professor Baruti's Potion-Making class and James was glad to see that she generally seemed to be in good spirits. Apparently, Izzy was settling in well at the small campus grade school, which was mostly attended by children of other teachers and administrators.

The two of them lived in a small apartment on the top floor of one of the houses on Faculty Row. James saw them occasionally at dinner in the cafeteria and sat with them whenever he did.

Strangely, those were the times when he felt the most homesick for Hogwarts, even more so than when he talked to Rose, Scorpius, and the rest via the Shard. Sitting with Petra and Izzy, Ralph, and Zane, laughing and talking, reminded him almost painfully of his days in the Great Hall and the Gryffindor common room. Sometimes, on these occasions, he felt the strangest feeling of loss and worry, as if he might never again return to those halls, might never again see all those familiar people and places. It was silly, of course. He'd be returning soon enough. Still, the feeling lingered, and sometimes, especially late at night, he'd find himself thinking of his last conversation with Professor Trelawney. He'd recall her distant, haunted eyes, and her frightening words: *The fates have aligned. Night will fall, and from it, there will be no dawn...*

Occasionally, James saw his mum and dad and sister Lily. They came to some of his Clutchcudgel matches, although not as many as they wanted to, according to his father. Harry Potter's work was becoming more and more hectic, he said, and James could see it in both of his parents' faces. There was a quiet tension there, and an unspoken worry. No outside newspapers made their way onto the campus of Alma Aleron, but James sensed that things were not at all well in the outside world.

"Don't you worry about it," Harry told him when James asked about it. He smiled at his son, but James could tell that it was a thin smile, put on mostly for his benefit. "You just keep at your schoolwork and your Clutchcudgel. Keep an eye on your brother too. Your mother and I are a little worried about him and those new friends of his in Werewolf House."

James shrugged and nodded. His dad was masking his larger worries with concerns about how Al might be fitting in with his fellow Werewolves. It was rather unsettling, but James determined not to make it his problem. He had done that enough over the last two years.

"I've heard of this Professor Magnussen bloke," James told Ralph and Zane the following weekend, walking along the cold flagstone footpath and kicking piles of dead leaves. "Back during our first year. Remember when I told you about sneaking out with the Invisibility Cloak and following my dad and Chancellor Franklyn around during their midnight meeting? Franklyn said something about Magnussen, made it sound like he was a real trouble maker. Compared him to that Umbridge witch that Dad told us about from back in his own day."

"That's pretty bad," Ralph considered, frowning slightly. "I remember those stories."

"But Magnussen's the key to the whole thing!" Zane insisted. "He's the one that found the key to the Nexus Curtain. We could look him up in the Archive, maybe figure out how he did it! If we did that, then maybe we could follow him through into the place between the worlds and find whoever it was that attacked the Vault of Destinies!" Zane's eyes boggled with excitement, but James sighed.

"You're a complete nutter," he said dourly. "We're done with that kind of thing, all right? Ralph and me, we got it all out of our system last year, chasing down that horrible Gatekeeper thing. Rose too. If she was here, she'd probably cuff you on the ear even for bringing it up."

"Hah," Zane replied, unperturbed. "I've spoken to Rose about it already through the Shard. She thinks it's worth checking out at least. So there."

Ralph spoke up uncertainly. "She says we should just tell James' dad about it and let him look into it. It's his job, after all."

"Mr. Potter's got his hands plenty full already," Zane answered breezily. "I've heard he's getting loads of flack from the local authorities, especially the Magical Integration Bureau. They're making things pretty tough for him, keeping him out of the loop."

"What?" James exclaimed angrily. "Where'd you hear that?"

"I eavesdropped on your dad and Chancellor Franklyn in the Kite and Key after Al's last Quidditch match. *Some* of us don't need any Invisibility Cloaks to pull that off."

James was rankled. "But why would the local authorities shut him out? He was sent here to *help* them, wasn't he?"

"Apparently they're suspicious of him," Zane replied. "Remember, here in the States, the Progressive Element is all over the place. Not *everyone* believes all that drivel about how Voldy was just a revolutionary thinker and a champion of the people, put down by the magical ruling powers of the day, but enough idiots *do* believe it that it makes trouble for people like your dad. They think he himself might even be behind some of that W.U.L.F. stuff. Apparently, they questioned him about the disappearance of that Muggle politician and the Chrysler Building. They even think he might have been in on the attack on the Vault of Destinies, especially since the missing thread managed to vanish without a trace and they've had no luck tracking it down, even though it'd leave a magical trail a mile wide. They think that your dad hasn't found the thread yet because maybe he doesn't really *intend* to. Like maybe he's covering for his own cronies or something."

"That's idiotic!" James fumed. "He's here to rout out the gang that did that stuff and stick them all in Azkaban!"

Ralph was thoughtful. "Well," he said slowly, "I'm not saying they're right, of course, but if he *was* involved with a group like the W.U.L.F., it would probably be the perfect cover for him to be on the team that was supposedly meant to investigate them. If you think about it from the Progressive Element point of view, that is."

Zane was impressed. "All that time you spent on Corsica's debate team really sunk in, didn't it, Ralphinator? You can think just like them when you need to."

"That's idiotic," James said again, kicking at a particularly large pile of leaves.

"The Progressive Element is idiotic," Zane replied. "Once you believe in that kind of stuff, other stupid stuff becomes a lot easier to swallow."

"But why would they think my dad would ever join such a bunch of awful people?"

"Ah," Zane said, smiling ruefully. "That's an easy one. A lot of Americans think that the W.U.L.F. is just a puppet organization, run by the Ministry of Magic and, specifically, the Auror

Department itself. They think that it's just a big scare tactic, meant to keep people afraid and willing to keep living with the old laws of Muggle-magical separation and all that."

Ralph shook his head. "They must think people like James' dad are a bunch of really twisted sneaks then."

Zane nodded.

The three boys stopped as they neared the Octosphere. The big black orb floated in its watery bed, which was now pasted with dead leaves. A dull, nearly inaudible rumble came from the slowly revolving stone.

"According to legend, Professor Magnussen invented this thing," Zane commented, resting his foot on the low stone wall that surrounded the pool. "Did you know that?"

"How do you invent a big black ball?" Ralph asked quizzically.

"It's not just a big black ball, you knucklehead," Zane replied. "It's an answer machine. You ask it any question you want and it'll tell you the answer."

"That's some pretty serious magic," James admitted grudgingly. "Are the answers always right?"

"Always," Zane nodded. "But they're never helpful. That's probably why it's right out here in the open, for anyone to use. If the answers were useful, this thing would probably be the most valuable tool in the whole magical world. You can bet that that's what old Professor Magnussen meant for it to be, if the legends about him are true."

"Why aren't the answers useful?" Ralph asked, peering closely at the slowly revolving stone sphere.

Zane shrugged. "It's all quantum. Magnussen was President of Igor House, a century or so ago, and he was apparently a super genius about technomancy. He was a big believer in this thing called the Wizard's Grand Unification something or other."

"Yeah," James said, warming to the subject. "Franklyn talked about that when he took us on the tour of the Archive. It's called the Wizard's Grand Unification Theory. He says that people used to believe that if you could measure everything everywhere, then you'd be able to predict the future. And if you could predict the future, then basically..."

"You could control it," Zane finished. "Yeah, that's how I heard it too. Apparently, Magnussen was crazy about it. He spent his whole life refining the theory, trying to make it work. The legend is that he used some really horrible methods, although nobody seems to know what they were, exactly. At any rate, this is one of the things he invented along the way. It uses the Grand Unification whatsit to tell you the answer to your question. There was some big flaw in the design, though, so that while the answer you get is technically right, it's almost always completely useless. Watch."

Zane turned to the slowly revolving stone orb. In a loud, carefully enunciated voice, he said, "Oh great mystical Octosphere, will Zombie House win this year's Quidditch tournament?"

James and Ralph leaned forward over the low wall that surrounded the pool, watching the sphere. After a few seconds, the sphere settled to a stop, and something seemed to move within it. Blurry white shapes swam up from the inky depths of the orb, solidifying until they reached the surface and became words. The three boys stared at them thoughtfully. They read:

'AS THE MOONS OF KTHULL ALIGN WITH THE GREAT HORN OF IPSUS'

After a moment, Ralph asked, "So is that a yes... or a no?"

"Nobody knows," Zane said brightly. "That's the point. My guess is that Kthull is a planet in some unknown galaxy. Ipsus is probably a constellation or something. Or maybe it's even a real beast with a real-life horn. Either way, it's impossible for us to know whether or not some crazy planet's moons line up with it, so even though the answer is correct, it's still completely useless to us."

Ralph asked, "So how do you know it's correct then?" James thought it was a very reasonable question.

Zane nodded. "Watch this." He turned again to the Octosphere. "Hey you, who won last week's Clutch match between Zombie House and the Igors?"

James and Ralph watched as the letters faded from the Octosphere's surface and it began to turn again, rumbling faintly.

"You don't really have to say the 'oh great mystical Octosphere' part," Zane admitted as they waited. "I just thought it would sound more, you know, impressive that way."

In the center of the pool, the black orb stopped turning again. Two words faded up from its depths.

ZOMBIE HOUSE

"See?" Zane said, gesturing toward the floating orb. "If it's an answer you already know, then it just gives it to you straight up. And it's always right."

"I see what you mean," Ralph frowned. "That's not very helpful at all."

Zane nodded. "I hear it drove Professor Magnussen crazy trying to figure out what the problem was with it. They say that's what drove him to seek out and open the Nexus Curtain, although no one knows why. Maybe if we can retrace his steps, we can find the answer to that mystery too!"

"No way," James said resolutely, sighing. "Mum was right. We've got enough on our hands, what with school, Clutch, and everything else. Whoever this Magnussen was, if there's anything there to find out, I bet my dad's already working on it. He'll find this Nexus Curtain and chase down whoever attacked the Vault of Destinies. You watch."

Zane seemed reluctant to let the issue go, but he didn't say anything more about it that afternoon or even the rest of the weekend.

On Monday morning, Professor Bunyan took the class up to the museum at the top of the Tower of Art, where he showed them portraits of many of the historical figures they'd been studying. Crouching under the museum's archways, the giant professor indicated paintings of famed American battles, showing how the secret magical contingent of the United States army, led by an American wizard named Quenton Harrow, had assisted in the fight. As James passed a portrait of General George Washington, he commented to Ralph that it was a shame the portrait couldn't talk.

"Who says I can't talk?" the portrait asked, affronted.

James, Zane, and Ralph spun around, surprised. Zane answered first. "But... you were a Muggle, right?"

"What, pray tell, is a Muggle, young man?" Washington asked sternly.

"Er," James said, stammering. "Someone who's not magical? How can you not...?" he gestured toward the portrait's gilt frame. "You're a talking painting!"

"And what of it?" Washington responded, raising his chin.

Ralph shook his head. "I'm confused."

Just then, Professor Bunyan placed one of his huge hands around the boys' shoulders, leading them away from the portrait.

"We try not to talk to the portraits of the Muggle historical figures," he said quietly. "Someone thought it'd be a good idea to magically preserve them for posterity, but being only vaguely aware of the magical world, many of them find the experience a bit... hinky."

James nodded, glancing back at the portrait of Washington. The president watched him stoically. James knew the figure was only paint on canvas, but he felt a little sorry for him nonetheless. He determined to come back later and keep the painting company despite Professor Bunyan's words.

That evening, James, Zane, and Ralph entered the cafeteria to find that it had been decorated for Halloween. Floating over the long tables were dozens of jack-o'-lanterns, grinning, leering, and occasionally swooping down to chomp a slice of pizza from an unsuspecting diner's hand. The skeleton from Mother Newt's Wiz Home Ec classroom had been commandeered, hexed a rather ghastly green, and installed near the main entrance, where it distributed trays to the students as they lined up for dinner. Professor Cloverhoof, the faun President of Zombie House, stood in the back of the room, directing a pair of girls who were busily hanging orange bunting from the low ceiling.

"Hi Professor!" Zane called as the three boys sat down beneath the floating pumpkins. "How's everything coming along for the costume ball?"

"Swimmingly," Cloverhoof answered distractedly. "A bit higher, Miss Worrel. There's nothing quite so depressing as crooked bunting. There we go."

"The Jersey Devil is taking his duties very seriously this year," Zane said in a stage whisper, turning back to James and Ralph. "He's chair of the committee for this year's Halloween Ball. Last year, Mother Newt did it, and we all about drowned in doilies and lace."

Ralph glanced up at a floating jack-o'-lantern that seemed to be eyeing his plate. "They have the costume ball in the cafeteria?"

Zane shook his head. "No, no, this is just where they have all the drinks and refreshments. It's always quite a spread. The actual dance takes place upstairs in the main ballroom. It's huge, with chandeliers the size of the Wocket and a big stage at one end. Don't tell anybody else," he added, leaning forward secretively, "but we got Rig Mortis and the Stifftones to play the show! Should be killer!"

"I've never heard of them," James said, rolling a slice of pizza and biting off the end.

"Yeah," Ralph added, "are they anything like The Boggart Brothers? I like them a lot."

"No," Zane answered curtly, clearly annoyed. "The Stifftones are only like the most popular band on American wizarding wireless. You two make me want to cry, I swear."

"*I've* heard of them," a girl's voice said. James glanced aside and saw Izzy plopping down next to Zane, clunking her tray onto the table in front of her. "I like them. 'Hex on My Heart' is my favorite song right now."

"Finally, somebody with some class," Zane sighed.

"How are you doing, Iz?" James asked the younger girl.

"We're good," Izzy answered, nodding toward Petra, who was approaching with her own tray. "My teacher says I'm already reading at a fourth-grade level, whatever that means. It's very good, apparently, considering I'd never gone to school before."

Zane nearly choked on a piece of crust. "You never went to school? Are you serious? Why not?"

"My mother," Izzy answered stoically. "She didn't think I was smart enough for it. She said it would be a waste of time for me and everyone else."

Petra settled in next to James. "Tell them what Mrs. Quandary told you today, Iz," she prodded.

Izzy smiled crookedly. "I get to play the Snow Princess in this year's Christmas show."

"Cool!" Zane grinned enthusiastically. "You got your wings and halo all picked out yet?"

"We have plenty of time for that," Petra said, beaming down at her sister. "She's just getting used to her wand, for now."

"Her wand?" James blinked. "But... Izzy's not... er."

"How are things in Bigfoot House?" Petra asked, glancing aside at James and smiling.

"James is teaching magic to the Bigfoot Clutch team," Ralph interjected proudly. "Looks like the Bigfoots might win a match for the first time in... I don't know. Ever, maybe."

James meant to downplay this detail, but then he noticed the way Petra looked at him, obviously impressed.

"That's excellent, James," she said, nudging him. "I've noticed how Team Bigfoot's been playing lately. Much more confident than when the season first started. Are you really responsible for that?"

James shrugged and looked away, his face reddening. "Well... you know. I... yeah. It's nothing, really."

"Nothing,' he says," Zane grinned. "James took that team from zero to hero in no time flat."

"We haven't even won a match yet," James said, trying to suppress a smile of pride. "But we did have one tie game."

"You watch," Zane insisted, ignoring James' protests. "My boy's going places. Maybe even pro! There was a guy last year, a Werewolf named Stubb, who got drafted by the Hoboken Hobgoblins. I bet James is even better than he was!"

"Stop!" James exclaimed, his cheeks burning. "Look, it's nothing, all right? I just taught them a few basic spells, that's all. For some reason, Wood wasn't coaching anything by way of a magic game. We're just catching up to everyone else now."

"He's so humble, isn't he?" Zane said mistily, nodding toward Petra. "Why, it breaks my heart. It really does."

James rolled his eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, the five of them made their way toward the cafeteria doors, talking excitedly about the upcoming Halloween Ball, and James was gearing himself up for something. He felt wound so tight that he thought everyone else must see it, as if he was physically vibrating. There was a knot of people near the door, milling around some unseen curiosity, and James touched Petra's elbow as they stopped to watch.

"Petra," he said, trying not to blush, "I was wondering..."

She turned back to him and brushed her hair out of her face with her hand. "Yes?"

"Er," he began, furious at himself for how awkward he sounded. He took a deep breath. "You know the costume ball that's coming up?"

She smiled at him wryly. "The one we were talking about just now? Sure. What about it?"

James ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah. Well, I know you're not really a student, like, but we've known each other for some time now, and... I thought maybe we could—"

The crowd near the doorway parted at that moment and somebody backed into Petra, bumping her.

"Make room, everyone," a voice announced. It was Professor Cloverhoof, his hands raised in the air.

James took another step toward Petra, trying to catch her attention again. "Anyway, I was just thinking, maybe you and me could—"

"Stand aside, Mr. Potter," Cloverhoof said, touching James on the shoulder. James glanced up, annoyed, and then sidled up next to Petra once more.

"Go on, James," Petra said, smiling slightly, her eyes twinkling. "I'm listening."

James smiled back at her, feeling harried but encouraged. He opened his mouth to speak, but another voice cut him off, piercing the air like fingernails on a chalkboard.

"You!" the voice cried, so high and shocked that it silenced the entire room at once. James startled and spun toward the owner of the screeching voice. A thin old man with very white skin and balding black hair stood in the center of the cafeteria doorway, supported between two witches in pale green robes. James recognized him vaguely, but couldn't remember where he might have seen him before.

"Yooooou!" the man screeched again, drawing the word out like a howl, his voice ebbing away as his breath ran out. James felt a thrill of panic as the man raised a trembling hand, the index finger extended. He was pointing at Petra.

"Mr. Henredon," one of the green-robed witches said, firming her grip on the man's arm. "Try not to get too excited. You're still very weak. You've only been thawed enough to walk for a few hours."

"It was *her*!" Henredon shrieked, tottering on his legs. "*She* was the *one*!"

James took Petra's hand, tried to pull her away, but she was rooted in place, her eyes frowning, narrowing.

"I dreamed of you," she said, her voice barely a whisper. Every eye in the crowded room had turned to stare at her.

"You're confused, Mr. Henredon," the second green-robed witch soothed, obviously shaken. "You've been through a terrible ordeal. Perhaps we should get you back to the medical center."

"SHE... FROZE ME!" Henredon shouted, his voice cracking, his eyes bulging in his pale face. "It was *her* in the Vault of Destinies! Her and some other horrible woman, but *she's* the one that did it! Her!" He crumpled then, and the green-robed nurses struggled to hold him up. Others rushed forward to assist as pandemonium broke out. Voices babbled as students backed away from Petra and James, forming a widening circle of staring, frightened faces.

"She froze me," Henredon continued, weeping, his voice growing lost in the increasing rabble. "She came out of the Vault, smiling like a demon... and she froze me..."



Within an hour, Harry Potter had arrived on campus and a gathering had assembled in a faculty lounge on the main floor of Administration Hall. In attendance were Harry, Chancellor Franklyn, Professor Cloverhoof, Petra, James, and a man James had never seen before who had arrived on campus only minutes before Harry Potter. The stranger wore all black robes, gloves, and a black hat with a very wide, flat brim. He had a pleasant face, although James thought there was something vaguely unsettling about it. As the man sat down on the bench near the dark window, James noticed that he seemed to be almost completely hairless. His face was as pink and smooth as a baby's, with his hat pressed down onto his bare scalp so firmly that it rested on his ears. He smiled at James as he smoothed out his robes, and James glanced away.

"It goes without saying," Chancellor Franklyn began, still standing and stoking the fire with a long poker, "that this is a very serious and rather shocking accusation."

James glanced at his father, but Harry Potter's face was as inscrutable as the poker in Franklyn's hand. The man in the wide-brimmed hat, James noticed, was looking at Harry as well, smiling a small pleasant smile. Franklyn slotted the poker into its stand and turned around.

"Mr. Henredon is one of our oldest and most reliable trustees. His service to the school has been entirely spotless. Thus, his allegation cannot be downplayed. If the confrontation that just took place had not occurred in front of much of the entire school, this would be somewhat simpler to address. As it is, direct and decisive action must be taken."

"But it couldn't have been me that froze the poor man," Petra said. "I wasn't anywhere near the Archive when the attack took place. I was asleep in my rooms!"

"You were on campus," the man in the flat-brimmed hat clarified evenly, "which places you in the vicinity of the crime, regardless of your specific location. And being asleep is not what one would tend to call an airtight alibi."

"Excuse me," Harry interjected, turning to the stranger. "I didn't get your name, sir."

"I haven't given it," the man replied, still smiling pleasantly. "I assumed that that was the Chancellor's honor. I'd hate to overstep my bounds."

"Pardon me," Franklyn said with a note of impatience in his voice. "Mr. Potter, this is the honorable Albert Keynes, General Arbiter for the Wizarding Court of the United States. Mr. Keynes, Harry Potter is a representative of the European Ministry of Magic, visiting us in pursuit of his duties as that entity's head Auror."

"A pleasure," Keynes nodded smugly, obscuring his face for a moment behind the black brim of his hat.

"I'm impressed that you were able to be here on such short notice," Harry replied, unsmiling. "General Arbiter sounds like a rather demanding and important post."

The man laughed lightly. "The title sounds more grand than it is, I'm afraid. There are, in fact, many of us, stationed all around the country, performing our given duties to the best of our ability. My station covers only Pennsylvania, but I admit that the metropolitan Pittsburgh and Philadelphia areas do take up most of my time. I was in the vicinity when I received the message from Chancellor Franklyn."

Harry asked, "You represent the American Wizarding Court then?" Before the man could answer, however, Chancellor Franklyn spoke up.

"We have a rather more hands-on approach to legal matters in the American magical world, Mr. Potter. A holdover from a time when magical individuals were scattered finely all across the country, making it necessary for the law to go to them, rather than the other way around. Mr. Keynes, in effect, *is* the American Wizarding Court."

"Judge, jury, and executioner," Professor Cloverhoof quipped darkly, buffing his nails on his lapel.

Keynes nodded. "Crude, but accurate enough, Professor," he said, and then turned to Harry. "I am an arbiter, Mr. Potter. My job is to make impartial judgments based on examination of the evidence and interviews of everyone involved in any given case. This is why I have requested that your son join us. I understand that he has observed much of what has taken place in connection with the attack on the Hall of Archives. You need not fear for his involvement. I am trained to be utterly fair and objective."

"I am glad to hear it," Harry replied. "Can we expect a quick end to this matter, then?"

Keynes clucked his tongue. "The role of the arbiter is simple, Mr. Potter, but we are trained to be exceedingly thorough. This is a particularly difficult case, as it is a matter of Ms. Morganstern's word against that of Mr. Henredon's. Judgments in such cases have been known to take months or even years to reach."

"But this is just stupid!" James interjected, his face reddening. "Petra was with Izzy when the Archive was attacked! That proves it wasn't really her that froze Mr. Henredon."

"Proof is a ticklish concept, my boy," Keynes said, shaking his head sorrowfully. "The young lady in question is the defendant's sister, rendering her testimony suspect, at the very least. Further complicating matters, I am given to understand that this is not your first encounter with the law, is it, Ms. Morganstern?"

Petra's expression cooled slightly as she looked at the man in the black hat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It might have slipped your memory," Keynes admitted with a nod. "It was the Muggle police, after all. I understand that such mundane authorities might not command the respect of

someone like yourself. As I mentioned, however; we arbiters are very thorough. On the way here, I perused the police report regarding what took place on the occasion of your last day at your grandfather's farm. Granted, I had to read between the lines a bit, but there is no question that the events of that morning resulted in at least one death, and quite possibly two, although the second, I admit, is pure conjecture on my part. Do you remember now, Ms. Morganstern?"

Petra stared at the man, her lips pressed into a thin line. After a moment, she nodded once, curtly.

"This is the first I have heard of these things," Franklyn said, peering at Petra and then Harry. "Might I inquire as to why a known criminal was allowed to be offered a position at this school?"

Harry didn't remove his gaze from the man in the black hat. "Petra is not a known criminal," he answered evenly. "The Auror Department conducted an investigation into the events at Morganstern Farm, and there was no indication of foul play. Warren Morganstern took his own life, as even the Muggle police report must show. His wife, Phyllis Morganstern, formerly Blanchefleur, has indeed gone missing, but since she was wanted for questioning regarding the deaths of both her first and second husbands, this is no great surprise."

Keynes smoothed his robes again as he said, "Your own investigation notwithstanding, Mr. Potter, these factors must be considered when rendering judgment on this most delicate issue. I will be calling upon many resources and interviewing any number of individuals, both as witnesses and as character references. I may even need to call upon Mr. Morganstern's widow, if, as you say, she is still among us. It may be months before I reach my verdict."

James didn't like Keynes one bit and felt quite confident that regardless of how long the verdict took to reach, the man would find Petra guilty in the end. "What will happen to Petra if you decide she's done what Mr. Henredon says?"

Keynes leaned back and laced his fingers over his chest. "The law is very clear in such cases, unfortunately," he said with undisguised relish. "Attempted murder can mean anywhere from twenty years to life in prison. Add to that the use of dark magic, the attack on the Vault of Destinies, and the thievery of a priceless relic in the form of the missing crimson thread—and yes, I do know of these things; as a member of the American Wizarding Court, not much escapes my notice—then it seems inevitable that Ms. Morganstern will spend the rest of her days in Fort Bedlam maximum security wizarding prison. Her sister, Izabella, will become a ward of the state. As a Muggle, it will be up to the Magical Integration Bureau to find her a new home in the non-magical community. She is underage, fortunately, which means that the authorities at the Crystal Mountain will likely move to have her memory Obliviated. This would probably be best for all involved."

"What kind of awful person are you?" James exclaimed angrily. "You act like there's nothing you'd rather see!"

"James!" Harry Potter said sternly, placing a hand firmly onto his son's shoulder.

Keynes smiled again at James and tilted his head sadly. "It is true, young man. There is nothing I prefer to see more than for justice to be done. It is a mistaken kindness to coddle the guilty. Someday I hope you will come to see the truth of that. Although I have my doubts."

He glanced at Harry and sighed. James saw that Keynes' upper lip was sweating lightly.

Petra spoke then, her voice strangely calm. "What will become of me and Izzy during your investigation?"

Keynes brightened a bit. "It is customary for the defendant to be handed over to the arbiter in charge of his or her case until such time as a judgment can be carried out. Therefore, from now until I reach my verdict, you shall be in my custody. Your sister, however, will be sent to the wizarding orphanage in Pittsburgh."

"My sister," Petra said coolly, "will be staying with me."

"I'm afraid you are in no position to make such requests," Keynes said, his smile widening. "It is a *Muggle* American tradition to deem the defendant innocent until proven guilty. It is a quaint notion that has no place in the Wizarding Court. Until such time as I may find you innocent, you are a suspect in a capital crime, thus you are considered a potential danger and a flight risk. You will be happy to comply with the rule of the law."

Franklyn cleared his throat. "Let's not be too hasty," he began, but Petra cut him off, her eyes still locked on Keynes'.

"Wherever I go, Izzy goes," she said. "It's not a request." Her voice sounded so calm that it was almost surreal, and yet James sensed a sudden chill in the room, making him shiver. Waves of cold seemed to be coming from Petra herself, where she sat next to him.

"Such obstinacy will not do you well as I pursue your case, Ms. Morganstern," Keynes said, his smile growing equally icy. "You may wish to alter your tone, lest I decide you are even more of a risk than I had heretofore envisioned."

"I doubt that would be a mistake," Petra said. James was almost certain that he saw her breath come out in puffs of fog as she spoke.

The tension in the air seemed to spike and James felt a sudden, inexplicable fear that something terrible was about to happen. Images flickered behind his eyes: a black castle, huge and dead, perched on the edge of a cliff; watching eyes hidden in shadow; a white hand holding a singularly ugly dagger with blood dripping from the blade. These were visions from Petra's dreams. They came to him now, flashing like lightning, cold as icicles. Somehow, she was broadcasting them to him, apparently unintentionally, on that invisible silver cord that still connected him to her. It was as if she was cycling up, like some kind of magical generator. He felt it, and it was awful, terrifying. What was she? How could she be so mysteriously powerful? James looked across the room, toward Albert Keynes, and suddenly he wanted to yell at the man to shut up, to stop antagonizing Petra. Not only because James loved her, but because he was afraid of her.

But then, surprisingly, James' father spoke.

"I completely understand your predicament, Mr. Keynes," he said, and his tone of voice seemed to sap the tension from the room. "After all, I am a man of the law myself. I am responsible for Ms. Morganstern's presence here. How would it be if I took responsibility for her, and her sister Izabella, during the course of your investigation?"

James turned to look at his dad, wide-eyed, as did Petra.

"It's a kind offer, Mr. Potter," Keynes said stiffly, sitting up straight in his seat. "But one I am duty-bound to refuse. The law, as I have mentioned, is quite clear."

"And as *I* have said, Mr. Keynes," Harry said a bit more loudly, "I am also a man of the law. And I'd like to remind you that *international* magical law provides allowance for foreign detainees to be given over to the custody of representative of their own nation during the course of any necessary legal proceedings."

Keynes looked hard at Harry, his eyes narrowed. The sweat on his upper lip glistened. James noticed that his father's expression, however, was perfectly neutral, as calm as a river stone.

"Are you quite certain, Mr. Potter," Keynes said softly, "that this is the course of action you truly wish to take?"

"I see no other option," Harry replied, "for a man of the law."

Keynes smiled again, slowly. "So be it, then. As a representative of the American Wizarding Court, I release Petra and Izabella Morganstern into your custody. Do know, however, that this means that both the wizarding legal authority and the Magical Integration Bureau will be watching you very closely. There will be sentinels posted near your home around the clock."

"Then they can join the ones that are already there," Harry replied with a sigh. "My wife has been known to invite them in for tea, although they have not yet taken her up on the offer."

"Mr. Potter," Petra whispered, leaning close to him. "You don't have to—"

"Is there any other business to attend to, then?" Harry interrupted, looking briskly from face to face. "No? Then I suggest that I escort Ms. Morganstern and her sister to their flat where they can gather whatever things they need."

The meeting broke up and there was a scuffling of feet and a creak as the door was swung open. Professor Cloverhoof stood near the entry, allowing the others to leave before him. His face was inscrutable as he looked down at James and winked. James followed his father out into the main hallway that ran straight through the center of Administration Hall. Petra rejoined her sister, who was waiting near the lobby stairs with Zane and Ralph. When James and his father reached the main entry, Albert Keynes sidled close to Harry, his demeanor friendly, if a bit condescending.

"I am aware, Mr. Potter," he said in a low voice, "that you provided sanctuary to Ms. Morganstern and her sister once before. It was, in fact, immediately after the unfortunate events of their last day on Morganstern Farm. Could it be that you know a bit more about those events than you are letting on?"

"I assure you, Mr. Keynes," Harry replied, "you know as much as I do about these things, and perhaps more. Your information seems to know no bounds whatsoever."

Keynes laughed, as if Harry and he were old friends. "Alas, if only that were the case. I only ask, though, because I *will* find out. If there are any secrets you might wish to divulge now, it could save us both some trouble later on. I fear that things could get a bit less... civil."

Harry paused for a long moment, and James looked up at him, watching. For a moment, James thought that his father would tell Keynes what he knew—that Petra had, in fact, been seen coming from the Hall of Archives on the night it was attacked, and maybe even that Merlinus Ambrosius harbored worries about Petra's mental state, and even her overall goodness. Finally, however, Harry merely shook his head.

"Feel free to interview me and my family, Mr. Keynes," Harry said, glancing down at James. "We are in the habit of telling the truth. Sometimes, however, you have to ask the right questions."

Keynes nodded, as if this was exactly the sort of answer he had expected. "Very good. I will begin my investigation this very night, and if it becomes necessary, I will indeed take you up on your offer. For now, I bid you good night. And, er, good luck. I suspect you will need it."

With that, Keynes pushed open one of the heavy front doors and vanished into the darkness beyond, humming happily to himself.

"Odious man," Franklyn said with a sigh. "But such individuals are, arguably, the grease that oils the axle of civilization."

Professor Cloverhoof nodded. "And in much the same way, one feels the need to scrub one's hands after coming into contact with them."

Murmuring agreement, the group made their way out into the chilly darkness.

Walking between James and his father, Petra asked, "Are you sure you really want to do this, Mr. Potter? It'll only make things harder for you and your family. I can handle myself, if I need to."

"It's nothing," Harry replied briskly, but then glanced down at her as they moved across the windy campus. In a lower voice, he said. "But pardon me for asking this, Petra, and know that I will only do so once: *did* you do what Mr. Henredon alleges? Were you involved, for some reason, in the attack on the Vault? Because Mr. Keynes, disagreeable as he is, is quite correct. The truth will be known. It is better to speak now than to be found out later. Are you guilty?"

Petra looked at Harry, and then at James. "I'm not. I swear it. I know a lot of weird stuff has happened around me, but I'm as baffled by it as everyone else. I want to know the truth just as much as Mr. Keynes does. Please believe me."

James spoke up. "I believe you, Petra," he said, meeting her eyes. She smiled aside at him, a little sadly.

Harry Potter, however, didn't say anything at all.



14. THE MAGNUSEN RIDDLES

"I thought you told me," Zane said the next day, "that if there was any connection between this old Professor Magnussen story and the attack on the Vault, your dad and Merlin and everybody else were already all over it."

James shook his head. "Come on," he urged. "It's already ten 'til two. Franklyn's office hours are nearly over."

"Yeah," Ralph said, warming to the subject. "What ever happened to all that stuff about us just being a bunch of school students with too much to do to get all wrapped up in any big adventures?"

James grabbed Ralph's sleeve and pulled the bigger boy around the corner into a high corridor lined with partially open doors. "That was then, this is now, all right? Dad's got his hands full with his own problems, especially now that he's got Petra and Izzy staying with them while that Keynes idiot does his investigating. We're not taking *over* for him, we're just helping. If there *is* anything to this whole thing about Professor Magnussen and the Nexus Curtain, we'll send it his way."

"I see how it is," Zane said with a smile. "Now that Petra Morganstern's fate is in the balance, you're willing to break the old Prime Directive, eh?"

"I don't even know what that means," James sighed impatiently. "Hurry. Franklyn's office door is still open."

All three boys piled to a stop just outside of the tall wooden door and peered inside. The office was surprisingly small, dominated by a very large oak desk, a set of visitor's chairs, and a bookshelf crammed with enormous books and the occasional clockwork gizmo. Franklyn sat at the desk facing the door, a large volume in his hands. He glanced up as the three students clambered to a halt.

"Boys," he said welcomingly. "What can I do for you?"

"Hi Chancellor," James said, entering the small room and looking around. "Er, this is your office?"

"One of them at least," Franklyn smiled. "This is the one that serves me for meeting with students and faculty. Why do you ask?"

James shrugged as he moved to stand behind one of the visitor's chairs. "No reason. I just expected something a bit... bigger."

"We thought we'd get to see your Daylight Savings Device again," Ralph added.

"Ah, yes, that," Franklyn answered, closing his book with a thump. "I keep that in my personal study. It is far too large and complex to leave in the faculty offices. After all, we are still victim to the occasional school prank, although such things are somewhat rarer nowadays, thanks to Madam Laosa."

"You mean *Crone Laosa*?" Zane asked, his eyes widening. "So she's really for real? Some of the Zombies were saying that she was just made up to scare us all out of exploring the basements."

"How may I help you boys?" Franklyn asked, smiling a little crookedly, obviously avoiding Zane's question.

"Er," James began, clutching the back of the chair in front of him, "we just have a quick question. It's about the history of the school. We thought you'd be the best person to ask."

Franklyn nodded approvingly. "Always a pleasure to see students taking an interest in the university. And I do suppose I am uniquely qualified to discuss its history since I have been alive throughout much of it. What's your question?"

James glanced back at Ralph and Zane, suddenly reluctant. "It's... er... about one of the professors."

"From a long time ago," Ralph added.

Franklyn's chair creaked as he leaned back in it. "We've had a rather impressive list of teachers throughout the years, continuing even to the present. Mr. Bunyan, the giant, is one of our most recent additions, and believe me, it was no small task to convince him to take the post. Prefers the wide open spaces, he does, along with his great blue ox, Babe."

"It's about Professor Magnussen," Zane blurted, stepping forward.

Franklyn's expression froze on his face. He paused, staring at all three boys.

"Do you remember him?" James prodded tentatively. "We looked him up in the library, but there was almost nothing. His full name was Ignatius Karloff Magnussen, and he was Head of Igor House like a hundred and fifty years ago or something."

Franklyn continued to study the boys, his eyes suddenly cautious. He leaned forward slowly again, producing another long creak from his chair.

Ralph said, "There are legends about this Magnussen bloke. They say that he opened up something called the Nexus—"

"Boys," Franklyn interrupted, "I am afraid that Professor Magnussen is a name from a period of time that this school would prefer to forget. It would behoove you not to inquire about him any further."

"Well," Zane replied slowly, glancing aside at his friends, "as much as I'd like to agree to that, I suspect that we're just about ten times more curious now."

Franklyn sighed hugely. "I suppose you learned of this in Professor Jackson's Technomancy class, yes?" He nodded to himself, not awaiting an answer. "The professor and I have had words on the subject. We have rather differing views regarding the merits of security versus disclosure. Perhaps I simply wish to make my job as Chancellor a bit easier. Surely the good professor would agree."

James risked pressing the matter a bit further. "What can you tell us, Chancellor? Is it true that Magnussen opened the Nexus Curtain and made his way into the World Between the Worlds?"

Franklyn stood up and straightened his waistcoat. He turned toward the window and leaned to peer out over the campus.

"He used to live in the most prominent faculty home of Alma Aleron, the one that originally belonged to John Roberts, one of the school's founders. He was a brilliant man, Magnussen, and yes, I knew him. He was, in fact, that most rare of men: he was a scientist, and he was a lover of stories. His calculating mind was equal to the best technomancers who've ever lived, but his love of the tale allowed him to think in creative, ingenious ways that none of his colleagues could ever dream. The characteristics that made him great, however, also led him to... obsessions. It was these, unfortunately, that drove him to commit acts that were both heinous and ultimately senseless."

Franklyn paused, apparently determining how much he should say. Finally, he went on, still peering out the window. "It was a time of great interest in magical exploration and experimentation. Schools such as Alma Aleron allowed a virtually unlimited amount of autonomy and resources to their teachers, all in the name of progress. Too late did we learn that sometimes progress means decay. Professor Ignatius Magnussen was allowed to conduct his experiments and pursue his goals, even though the costs were far higher than we knew at the time, and the dangers were... well, incalculable. By the time he was found out, it was too late to stop him. In the end, he fell victim to his own designs, and that, unfortunately, is the end of his story."

"What did he do, sir?" James persisted.

Franklyn was thoughtful. After a moment, he glanced back at the boys, his eyes narrowed. "Why, pray tell, are you three so interested in this?"

"Er..." James began, but Zane overrode him.

"We're just curious, sir. It's in our natures. You know how we young people are."

Franklyn studied Zane for a long moment. "Indeed I do. Curiosity is a good thing, my young friends. It is the fuel for the engine of invention. But like any fuel, it can be dangerous. It can burn you, if you are not careful with it."

James asked, "Is that what happened to Professor Magnussen?"

Franklyn's face remained calm as he shifted his gaze to James. After a long moment, he said, "Magnussen lived in the home that once belonged to one of this school's three founders, as I said. It is the home that now stands in ruins at the opposite end of the mall." He nodded toward the window. "Professor Magnussen is the *reason* that that building was reduced to rubble. His laboratory was there and it was the scene of terrible things. When these things became known, a riot erupted on the campus. Hundreds rushed to the mansion, intent on dragging Magnussen out and bringing him to justice. Of course, an arbiter had already been assigned to Magnussen—justice had already been set into motion—but because of Magnussen's status, he was granted the privilege of maintaining his post and his home during the investigation. This infuriated the population of the school, including, I regret to say, much of the faculty. During the fracas that followed, Magnussen escaped from the mansion. In the aftermath, the mansion was burned nearly to the ground. To this day, no one knows if the fire was an accident or deliberate. Some say that Magnussen himself set it, meaning to distract everyone from his escape. Either way, it not only destroyed the mansion, it wiped out all the evidence of what Magnussen had done. And, frankly, perhaps that was for the best."

Zane was impressed. "So what happened to him after that? Did he live out the rest of his days on some South American island somewhere?"

"Ignatius Magnussen was never seen or heard from again," Franklyn answered brusquely, seating himself once more at his desk. "The most likely explanation is that he escaped via the rift that he created into some reality that none of us can even imagine."

"So he *did* succeed in opening the Nexus Curtain!" Ralph exclaimed.

Franklyn pinned Ralph with a steely gaze. "He succeeded in opening *something*, Mr. Deedle. Unfortunately, we had virtually no time to question him before his escape and the fire ruined what clues we might have gained in his absence. Therefore, no one knows for sure what he did or where he might have gone. All we know is that his 'success' came at great cost and ruined many lives. I suggest you leave it at that."

James wanted to ask more, but Franklyn's expression made it clear that he was done discussing the topic. The three boys thanked the Chancellor and excused themselves as quickly as possible.

"Well," Ralph said once they had exited Administration Hall, "that was pretty much a bust."

James pulled his cloak around him as the wind picked up. "At least we found out that Magnussen really did open up the Nexus Curtain," he replied. "That means that there might be something to Zane's theory. Maybe whoever really did steal the crimson thread used it to open the Curtain again, and is still hiding out there, in the World Between the Worlds. If we can figure out how Magnussen got through, then maybe we can do it as well."

Zane feigned surprise as he said, "I thought we were just going to turn this all over to the great Harry Potter and his squad of Auror superdudes?"

"Shut up, already, why don't you?" James grumbled crossly. "Dad's got enough on his hands. There's no harm in us following a few leads, is there? It'll save him some time. Besides, we're already right here on campus. We can do all the footwork more easily than he can. I just wish Franklyn hadn't been so tight-lipped about everything. He gave us almost nothing to go on."

Zane sighed expansively and stopped walking. A moment later, Ralph and James stopped as well and turned to look back at him.

"Maybe," the blonde boy said with a crooked smile, "we can try it *my way* now?"



James was quite curious as to what Zane's way actually was, but as it turned out, the next few days were too busy for the boys to attempt anything at all.

On Friday evening, James joined Zane, Albus, Lucy, and Ralph at Pepperpock Down for the Vampires versus Werewolves Clutchcudgel match. Albus rooted ardently for his own team while Lucy led spirited cheers and waved a red and black banner in her gloved hands. James, Ralph, and Zane, however, liking neither team, cheered only when there were penalties or injuries, earning quite a few disapproving looks from those in the grandstands around them. In the end, Werewolf House defeated the Vampires by a score of eighty-eight to sixty-five, leaving Lucy in a grumpy mood that lasted well into her second licorice soda at the Kite and Key.

James spent most of Saturday afternoon in the attic of Hermes House, accompanied by Zane, in search of a costume for that evening's Halloween Ball. Together, they settled on a mummy costume comprised mostly of shreds of old sheets, which had, for some forgotten reason, been tie-dyed into rainbow colours.

"We'll call you the Saturday Night Fever," Zane proclaimed happily, examining James in his costume. "The Disco Mummy! You'll be a total hit. Frankly, I'm a little jealous."

Having failed disastrously in his attempt to make Petra his date to the Ball, James sought out and asked Lucy to go with him, figuring that they could have more fun together than apart. She agreed instantly and with rather more enthusiasm than James had expected. When he arrived at Erebus Mansion that evening to escort her to the ball, she came down the main staircase dressed as a vampire princess, resplendent in a rather striking black dress, boots, and a vial of blood worn on a black ribbon around her neck.

"It's not real blood," she smiled sheepishly, showing her canine teeth, which had been hexed into long points for the evening. "It's just poisonberry juice, so I really can drink it if I want to. I borrowed the boots from Professor Remora. Can you believe her feet are nearly as small as mine?"

James told her that he couldn't and that he frankly preferred to think of Professor Remora's feet as absolutely little as possible. Along the way to Administration Hall, they met Ralph, who was dressed as a ghost with a rather sadly moth-eaten sheet over his head. Together, the three made their way down to the cafeteria for drinks and then up to the main ballroom, where the band, Rig Mortis and the Stiffstones, was already well into their first set.

It turned out to be a delightfully raucous evening. The music was very loud and after a few failed attempts, Lucy finally coaxed James into joining her on the dance floor. Zane was already there, gyrating and bouncing wildly, dressed, of course, as a zombie. He'd painted his face green, added some stitches with black magic marker, and donned a moldy, ill-fitting, powder blue tuxedo. Across from him, Cheshire Chatterly looked rather fetching as his zombie prom date, complete with a blood-stained pink taffeta dress and every inch of exposed skin charmed a deathly, blotchy blue.

"Some party, eh?" Zane called as he shimmied past.

"It is!" James called back, grinning. In front of him, Lucy danced happily, looking surprisingly beautiful with her hair done up in a complicated beehive. He told her as much as the lights flashed and twirled all around. Even in the flickering dimness, he saw the blush rise to her pale cheeks and she smiled at him, obviously pleased.

It wasn't until the following Wednesday afternoon that Zane finally gathered James and Ralph and told them to get ready for a little 'fact-finding mission' once classes were over for the day. By five o'clock, all three boys met at Apollo Mansion for a quick dinner.

The meal was prepared by the house steward, a bald, hunched, painfully thin wizard whose demeanor usually hovered somewhere between veiled crankiness and outright hostility. Known only as Yeats, the steward had apparently been a fixture in Apollo Mansion for nearly seventy years and didn't seem to have any intention of retiring, ever. He was so old that he appeared to be in need of a good dusting, but he moved with a sort of grim economy that implied that if ever the need arose, he could probably tackle any single member of Bigfoot House with one of his large knuckly hands while flipping crepes with the other.

"I hope this is to the young sir's liking," he said through gritted teeth as he pushed their plates in front of them. "Cheeseburgers and homemade potato chips. The cornerstone of any nutritious dinner."

"Thanks, Yeats," Ralph said, digging in.

"What is it about that guy?" Zane asked quietly as Yeats retreated slowly to the stove. "Every time we ask him for something, I get the impression that he's barely restraining himself from hexing us into salt and pepper shakers."

James shrugged and munched a potato chip. They were still hot and sprinkled with some kind of crumbly blue cheese. "Yeats is all right," he said. "Reminds me of home. He's like a grown-up human version of Kreacher."

"He is!" Ralph nodded, his mouth full. "I *knew* he seemed familiar. You're right. He does remind me of good old number twelve Grimmauld Place."

Twenty minutes later, the three boys made their way out into the darkening evening, Zane in the lead. James noticed that they were heading toward the Hall of Archives.

"Just doing a little research, fellas," Zane said to the Werewolf students who were still serving as guards around the Archive steps. "Or do we need a permission slip signed in triplicate from the Chancellor himself?"

"Just make it quick, Walker," one of the Werewolf boys sneered. "The Hall gets locked up at eight on the dot, whether you're out of there or not."

"Hey," Zane grinned as he trotted up the steps toward the huge doors, "that rhymed! You've been practicing that one, haven't you? You Werewolves are so stinkin' clever."

"Smile while you can, Walker," another of the boys called. "We'll see if you're still grinning this Friday night after your team meets ours on the Clutch course."

"Well, that didn't rhyme at all," Zane admonished. "Back to the doghouse with you."

The Werewolf boys bristled, but they were apparently too committed to their guard duties to abandon their posts. James and Ralph sidled up the steps behind Zane, avoiding eye contact with the older boys on either side.

"So what are we going to do here?" James asked as they entered the round, darkened room of the Disrecorder. "Even if there are any relics from Magnussen's time, they'd be in the restricted section of the Archive. We can't get in there, no matter how many Werewolves you insult."

"Au contraire," Zane announced, producing a slim golden key from his pocket. James recognized it.

"That's an Archive skeleton key," he said, impressed. "Just like the one Franklyn used when we went down to the Vault of Destinies. How'd you get that?"

Zane shrugged. "I've been planning things out for some time now. I figured that you'd eventually warm up to having a little extracurricular adventure. What do you think I agreed to go with Cheshire Chatterly to the costume ball for?"

Ralph suggested, "Because she looks excellent in a pink taffeta dress?"

"Well, yes, there is that," Zane answered thoughtfully, "but that's not all there is to it. She's on the maintenance crew that works here in the Archive, and she's always been on Henredon's good side."

"I can see why," Ralph nodded.

James shook his head wonderingly. "You nicked the key from her?"

"No!" Zane exclaimed, offended. "I just asked her for it. What kind of cad do you think I am?"

"Sorry," James replied, blinking.

"I told her I needed to look up some famous old dancer so I could practice my steps for the ball. She about split in two. Gave me the key that very second."

Ralph whistled, impressed. "You danced with a girl just to get your hands on that key?"

"Anything for the cause," Zane sighed. "Come on."

Using the key, the boys opened the door to the inner archive. After some nervous slinking around, they finally found a gated section locked off with a large chain and padlock. A quick wave of the skeleton key and a tap of Zane's wand opened the padlock, however, and the three crept slowly into the dark chamber beyond.

"It's so dark and dusty," Ralph commented, keeping his voice unconsciously hushed. "How are we going to find what we're looking for in all this?"

"Cheshire told me how they catalog things in here," Zane answered, holding his lit wand overhead. "Date first, and then the name of the event or person. Look at the top of the aisles. Magnussen taught between eighteen thirty and eighteen fifty-nine."

"Over here," James called, peering up at the shelves. The other two joined him and began skulking along the shelves, examining the myriad odd objects and blowing dust off their yellowed note cards.

A shuffling sound surprised the boys. They froze in place, eyes wide, staring at each other.

"Was that one of you?" James whispered.

Ralph gulped. "It wasn't me. It came from the aisle behind us."

"It was probably nothing," Zane whispered, glancing around. Almost immediately, a faint thump sounded nearby. All three boys jumped. Slowly, James turned toward the sound, lifting his wand. He was barely breathing. As one, the three boys leaned around the end of the aisle, peering into the darkness beyond.

Something pushed out of the shelf immediately next to James' face, mashing up against his cheek and making a noise like a tiny motorboat. He cried out and leapt into the air, dropping his wand and scrabbling at his cheek.

"Patches!" Zane rasped, his eyes bulging.

James spun around, heart pounding, and looked. Patches the cat stood on the shelf, purring noisily, his bullet head bobbing. There were cobwebs caught in his whiskers.

"Patches, you rascal!" Zane declared, reaching to scratch the cat between the ears. "What are you doing down here? You about gave James a heart attack!" He laughed nervously.

"Seems to me *you* were pretty wigged out too," James grumped, reaching to pick up his dropped wand. "You try getting some great furry head and wet nose pushed into your face out of the dark and see how you feel about it."

"What's he doing down here?" Ralph asked, stepping forward to pet the cat himself. "I thought he always hung out around Administration Hall."

Zane nodded. "He does. I've never seen him anywhere else."

"Is it just me," Ralph said, glancing sheepishly between Zane and James, "or does this feel like kind of a bad jinx? Maybe we should call the whole thing off, eh?"

James expected Zane to scoff at the suggestion, but when he turned to the blonde boy, he saw him studying the cat critically.

"What's up, Patches?" he asked the cat where it still stood purring on the shelf. "You here to grant us your blessing? Or are you going to rat us out to the big wigs back at Administration Hall?"

The cat stopped purring almost immediately. He hunkered low and peered over the ledge of the shelf. A moment later, he thumped lightly to the floor and began to stalk off along the aisle, his tail sticking up.

"Well," Zane blinked, "pardon me for living."

Ralph said, "Maybe he was offended by the word 'rat'."

"Come on," James suggested, turning back to the shelves. "Forget him. He's just a cat. If you remember, he thought we were supposed to be in Igor House."

Zane glanced at James. "Have you wondered if maybe he was right?"

James met his friend's gaze and frowned. "What do you mean? Bigfoot House fits us just fine. What's some old cat know that we don't?"

"I'm just saying," Zane replied. "There's a reason he's here. Maybe it's worth thinking about."

James felt impatient. He stopped and stared up at the dark ceiling for a moment. "There," he said, glancing back at Zane and Ralph. "I've thought about it. Can we get on with it now? This place creeps me out."

Zane shrugged. Dismissing the cat, the three returned to their search of the shelves. A few minutes later, Zane called out. James and Ralph trotted down the aisle to join him.

"It's..." Ralph began, and then swallowed thickly. "It's... a skull."

James held his wand closer. Two objects were pushed into a small cubby hole, and one of them was indeed a human skull, missing its jawbone. The other was a woman's boot, very old and scuffed, made of black leather. The card affixed to the front of the shelf read: 1859, OCTOBER 5, I. K. MAGNUSEN INTERROGATION 1.

"Maybe it's not real," James suggested, peering at the yellowed skull.

"It sure *looks* real," Ralph said, shuddering.

"It's just an old bone," Zane said, rolling his eyes and reaching for the skull. "I'll carry it. Grab the boot and let's get this over with."

As quickly as they could, the three boys carried their acquisitions back up to the room of the Disrecorder. James breathed a sigh of relief as he walked beneath the thick, tiny windows embedded in the domed ceiling. It was dark outside now, but it was nice to see the faint blue glow of the night sky above.

"Who wants to do the honors?" Zane asked, holding up the skull and peering at it. "What do you think, Mr. Bones?" He moved the skull like a puppet and answered in a higher voice, "I think you should, Zane-brain, since you're so cool and dashing. And this was your idea after all."

James sighed wearily. "Quit it. You're freaking out Ralph."

"I'm not freaked out," Ralph objected, his face pale. "I mean, yeah, I am. But just a little."

"Let's get to it then," Zane squeaked, puppeting the skull again. "Upsie-daisy."

With a small clunk, Zane set the skull onto the concave bowl of the Disrecorder.

Instantly, the room changed. It brightened and became much smaller. James, Ralph, and Zane turned on the spot and found themselves in a dim corner, peering into a sort of cramped study. Fire crackled in the brick fireplace and darkness pressed against the tall windows. Three men were seated at a table, two on one side, facing the third. James was not entirely surprised to see that Chancellor Franklyn was one of the men seated at the table. He looked only slightly younger, with a rather less rotund middle. The man next to him wore the black robes and hat of an arbiter, although his skin was dark and he had a thin beard. In the center of the table, looking like a Halloween decoration, was the yellowed, jawless skull. The dark man had just finished tapping it with his wand.

"Douglas Treete, General Arbiter of the Wizarding Court of the United States of America, Philadelphia Station," he said blandly. "Overseeing the preliminary interrogation of one Ignatius Karloff Magnussen, detained for various charges, including theft and misuse of corpses, torture, and suspicion of murder. I have chosen to use this skull as the relic for this interrogation since it serves as Exhibit A for the case in question. I am accompanied by Benjamin Amadeus Franklyn, Head of the

Alma Aleron Technomancy Department, and immediate superior of the defendant. Professor Magnussen, if you would state your full name for the record."

James turned his attention to the man seated across from Franklyn and the arbiter. Magnussen was large with a barrel chest and a square head crowned with a fringe of short grey hair. His expression was grim, his dark brow lowered over a sharp, finely sculpted nose.

"I am Professor Ignatius Karloff Magnussen the Third," he said, and James was surprised by the man's cultured, pleasant voice. Unlike most Americans, Magnussen spoke with a distinct British accent.

Zane leaned toward James and Ralph and whispered, "I heard that he never approved of America's break from England. In protest, he always spoke in what he called 'the King's English'."

James frowned and listened as Treete, the arbiter, spoke again.

"You are aware of the allegations against you, Professor Magnussen?"

Magnussen didn't respond. He simply stared across the table, his eyes like steel marbles. Treete cleared his throat.

"For the record, Professor, you are accused, at the very least, of dabbling in forbidden practices that threaten the stability of the dimensional hierarchy. Is it true that you have sought to control the future by exploitation of the Wizarding Grand Unification Theory?"

Magnussen remained utterly impassive. James could tell that the man was listening, for he stared at the men across from him as if he intended to pin them to a corkboard like butterflies. He simply did not seem to feel the need to respond to their questions. Franklyn, for his own part, appeared completely miserable. His face was pale behind his square spectacles.

"So be it, then," Treete said, adjusting his own glasses and peering down at a parchment in front of him. "You are further accused of opening a rift between dimensions, something legendarily referred to as the Nexus Curtain, with no regard to the consequences. How do you respond to this allegation?"

Magnussen did not stir. He might as well have been an extremely lifelike statue.

Treete had apparently resigned himself to Magnussen's silence. "Additionally, sir, you are accused of stealing bodies from the campus graveyard and conducting unlawful dissections of them. This skull, as I have mentioned, is Exhibit A in regard to that allegation. It was found in the basement of this very house, along with the sort of tools one might expect to use for such purposes. Furthermore, you are suspected in the abduction and torture of as many as eight Muggle citizens of the city of Philadelphia. Evidence of hasty Obliviation has only succeeded in destroying these victims' ability to identify their tormentor, but has left traces of memories of this school and the magical world at large."

Treete took off his glasses and stared hard at Magnussen. "Such acts, if they are proven to be true, break any number of very serious laws, Professor, not to mention the law of common human decency to which we all profess to ascribe. None of these, however, are as serious as the final accusation. As you are certainly aware, the corpse of a young Muggle woman, an impoverished local

seamstress by the name of Fredericka Staples, was recently found in an alley near the entrance to this school. Her body was mutilated nearly beyond recognition and she was missing a single boot. That missing boot, sir, was discovered two nights past in the basement of this home. I must ask you again: how do you respond to these allegations?"

Magnussen stirred for the first time, but when he spoke, he addressed Franklyn. "Was it you who summoned the authorities?" he asked, his voice merely conversational.

"You gave me little choice," Franklyn replied quietly. "Research is one thing, Ignatius. This..." He shook his head.

Magnussen smiled tightly. "You always were too weak to appreciate the risks associated with any great endeavor. You, Benjamin, are an academician. You are not like me. You are not an explorer."

"Yours is not a dream of exploration," Franklyn replied, his face darkening. "It is an obsession with power. This is not one of your fanciful stories of the heroic outcast struggling against ignorant foes. Your actions have affected real people. I should have intervened months ago when I discovered that you were experimenting with the Wizarding Grand Unification Theory. The Octosphere was bad enough, but at least it turned out to be harmless. Attempting to observe and measure all things at once, in the name of domination, is a madman's fantasy."

"I was mistaken, I agree," Magnussen replied, as if he and Franklyn were merely discussing the matter as friends. "I was preoccupied with the microscopic. I fell into the conviction that observing all things meant breaking the world down into smaller and smaller bits, recording the actions of even the most infinitesimal details—the motion of blood corpuscles through the pathways of arteries, the firing of neurons in individual human brains. I studied these things in great detail, learning what I could from the dead, gaining even more knowledge from my systematic studies of the living. You choose to call it torture, of course, and yes, even murder, because you fail to grasp the monumental nature of the end goal. What is mere infliction of pain in the face of perfect understanding? What is one paltry life in the name of the total unification of the cosmos?"

"Ignatius," Franklyn interrupted. "Stop! You are only making matters worse for yourself."

"Eventually," Magnussen went on, now leaning slightly over the table, his eyes bright, "I determined that I was thinking too much like my fellows, failing where all those before me had failed. With that realization, I remembered my *Heraldium*; 'He who fails to see the mountain stumbles headlong over the pebbles.' Don't you see? The secret was not in the microscopic at all, Benjamin. The secret, of course, was in the *macroscopic*! Not the tiny, but the monumental! Totality of measurement could only be accomplished when one could view the totality of *realities*! I knew then what I had to do. I had to break out of the confines of this dimension and find a place where I could observe *all* dimensions at *once*. What you call a mere legend, I have walked upon with my own two feet. I have been through the Nexus Curtain. I have trod the World Between the Worlds and witnessed the pathways into every other dimension."

Treete shook his head, his eyes narrowed. "Am I to understand then, Professor, that you are admitting to all of the allegations leveled against you?"

"Please, Ignatius," Franklyn said, nearly pleading with the big man across from him. "Your obsessions have driven you to madness. Whatever you have done, whatever you have seen, it has obviously affected you in some dreadful way. There is help for you here, if you choose to seek it. Beware what you say, lest you forfeit that option."

Magnussen chuckled drily. "You think that I should care what this little man can do to me? Let him attempt to stop me. I am beyond the rim now, Benjamin. I am past the event horizon of destiny, incapable of returning even if I wished to. And I do *not* wish to. I embrace my mission. I will go to it with great relish."

Treete pushed back his chair and stood up. "I am afraid that I have no choice then, sirs. Out of respect for your position, Professor Magnussen, and at your personal request, Professor Franklyn, I leave you now to formulate my verdict. You can expect my return within the week, along with a cadre of wizarding police, to escort the defendant to the Crystal Mountain for processing. Professor Franklyn, for the interim, will you state your willing assumption of full responsibility for the guarding of the defendant?"

Franklyn's eyes remained locked on Magnussen. "I assume full responsibility for the defendant."

"So be it," Treete said briskly. He retrieved his wand from his sleeve, reached out, and tapped the yellowed skull that sat on the table before him. Instantly, the room vanished, leaving James, Zane, and Ralph blinking in the darkness of the hall of the Disrecorder.

"Whoa," Zane breathed, looking down at the yellowed skull.

Ralph shook his head slowly. "Franklyn wasn't kidding around when he said that that bloke was someone the school would like to forget."

"Well, now we know *why* Magnussen went through the Nexus Curtain, at least," James sighed. "He was convinced that he had to measure everything in every *dimension* in order to know the future and control it. Is that how it sounded to you?"

Zane nodded. "Magnussen was one crazy whack job. I see why he was Head of Igor House. But where most of those guys just talk a big game about wanting to take over the world, *he* actually went out and *did* something about it."

"But we still don't know *how* he got through the Nexus Curtain," Ralph commented. "And that's the bit we really need to know, right? How else are we going to get through to the World Between the Worlds and see if the real bad guys are hiding out there?"

Zane took the skull gingerly from the bowl of the Disrecorder. "According to Professor Jackson, the Nexus Curtain can only be opened with a key from some other dimension. Whoever attacked the Vault of Destinies has the crimson thread from the Loom, which would do the trick since it came from some neighboring reality. What could Magnussen have used as a key?"

James shrugged and nodded toward Ralph, who was holding the second relic, the old boot. "Let's try that one. Maybe it'll tell us what we need to know."

Ralph looked down at the boot in his hands. "You think this is the boot that they talked about in the vision? The one that belonged to that Muggle woman that Magnussen, er..."

"Just put it on the thing, Ralph," Zane said, shaking his head slowly.

Ralph stepped forward and placed the small boot onto the stone pedestal before him. In response, the hall of the Disrecorder dimmed, but remained relatively unchanged. For a moment, James thought that there was something wrong with the relic, but then he heard a voice, echoing quietly. He followed the sound of it, turning to look about the hall, and saw a single flame burning in a small table lamp. Next to it was Benjamin Franklyn, seated in a wooden chair with a desk attachment, writing. Unlike the previous vision, which had been bright and solid, the image of Franklyn looked almost like a projection on smoke. Franklyn's ghostly quill scratched on the parchment as he spoke the words aloud, dictating to himself. His voice seemed to come from very far away.

"These are the notes of Professor Benjamin Amadeus Franklyn," he said slowly, bent over the parchment, "detailing the final records of the events of this night, October the eighth, eighteen fifty-nine, the last night of Professor Ignatius Magnussen, formerly a valued teacher at this institution, and a friend..."

Franklyn stopped and looked up, almost as if he'd heard the boys' scuffling footsteps. James froze in place, but then he realized that the vision of Franklyn was merely pausing to think. His eyes were bright behind his square spectacles. After a long moment, he drew a breath and leaned over the parchment again.

"The flames still burn in the foundation of the house Ignatius Magnussen once called home. How the fire began, no one knows for sure. I myself suspect a deliberate causation, perhaps even set by the professor himself. The mob that preceded the fire was maddened beyond reason and did nothing to extinguish the flames once they appeared. I am dismayed to announce that there were many in tonight's assembly who wished to see Magnussen's corpse pulled from the dying flames, killed as surely as the fire destroyed his home. Preliminary observation of the ruins, however, has revealed no trace of the professor's body. I have no doubt that further searches over the coming days will prove equally unsuccessful. Magnussen is not here. He has escaped, probably during the very height of the fire, while the vengeance-seeking riot was in full fever."

Franklyn stopped writing again. He put down the quill and pushed his hand up under his spectacles, rubbing his eyes wearily. He didn't seem to want to go on, but after a moment, he retrieved the quill and began again, speaking the words aloud as he wrote them.

"Where Ignatius Magnussen has gone, I cannot begin to guess. Surely, he has by now accomplished what he swore was his destiny: he has retraced his steps through the Nexus Curtain, into whatever unknowable realm lies beyond. I believe it is likely that from that realm he will never return, thus I wish to record what I now know of his most recent endeavors. Unfortunately, my interviews with the professor over the previous two days revealed very little useful information. There are only two details worth remembering. The first was his riddle regarding how he learned to open the Nexus Curtain. He told me, and I quote..."

Franklyn paused again and retrieved another parchment from the table next to him. He studied it closely, adjusting his spectacles. James noticed that the woman's boot was sitting in the darkness beneath the table, leaning against one of the chair's thin spindly legs.

"And I quote," Franklyn went on, putting his quill to the parchment before him, "'The truth walked the halls of Erebus Castle. It was there all along, for anyone to see.' I myself have walked those halls for well over a century, and have not met anyone or anything that spoke of the paths of the Nexus Curtain. If there is any truth in Magnussen's claim, then it is carefully hidden and will require further study."

James turned to Zane, his eyes widening. "Erebus Castle is the home of Vampire House, right?" he whispered.

Zane nodded. "We can get in and explore around a bit, if Lucy lets us."

"Shh," Ralph hissed, leaning closer to the ghostly vision of Benjamin Franklyn.

"The second detail is, I fear, an even more obscure riddle. When asked where the Nexus Curtain was, Magnussen only smiled and said nothing. This, of course, is the detail which concerns me most since if what the professor claims is true, then he has succeeded in breaching the divide into the World Between the Worlds. I fear less the dimensional instabilities that might be created by such a rift. More, I fear what may come through into our own dimension from those beyond. My entreaties to Magnussen—that the boundaries between the worlds are there for good reason, to establish barriers between incompatible realities—fell entirely upon deaf ears. Finally, however, late last night, Professor Magnussen gave me an answer to my question, although I suspect that it is as useless as anything that might be provided by his damned Octosphere. When pressed about the location of the Nexus Curtain, he finally smiled and told me," here, Franklyn made a weary but passable imitation of Magnussen's accent, "'It lies within the eyes of Rowbitz.'"

He paused once more, rereading what he had written. With a sigh, he began to write again.

"The riddle is intentionally misleading and probably hopelessly obscure, and yet I know the professor well enough to know that he would not merely lie. He is too arrogant not to have offered up a valid clue, even if it would be impossible to solve. In time, I will study both of these quotes, in the hopes of finding the Nexus Curtain, and closing it forever. For now, however, I find that my duties must revolve around the more immediate concerns of calming the school and explaining myself to Arbiter Douglas Treete. I have failed in my duties... in more ways than one."

Franklyn sighed deeply, put down his quill, and carefully folded the parchment he had written upon. When he was done, he retrieved the small boot from the floor next to him, slipped the folded parchment into it, and then tapped the boot with his wand.

The vision evaporated in a puff of dry smoke, returning the Hall of the Disrecorder to its normal dimness.

Immediately, Zane tucked the skull under his arm, turned around, and reached for the old boot that sat atop the stone pedestal. He peered inside it.

"It's still there!" he said, smiling. "Franklyn's old note! Parchment feels like it'll crumble to bits if I pull it out, though. Cheshire and the catalog crew probably would have preserved it somehow if they'd known it was there."

"The Nexus Curtain lies within the eyes of Rowbitz," Ralph said thoughtfully. "Any ideas who Rowbitz is?"

Zane scrunched his face up with concentration. "It rings a bell, actually. I'll see what I can find out."

"And we can ask Lucy about letting us look around the halls of Erebus Castle," James added. "We have two clues to go on. Not bad."

"Wait a minute," Ralph said, shaking his head. "If these clues were solvable, don't you think that Chancellor Franklyn would have figured them out by now?"

Zane glanced at Ralph, thinking. "How do we know he didn't?"

"What do you mean?" James asked.

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time somebody had discovered some terrible secret and then just sat on it. You heard him in the vision. Even if he did find out the secrets of the Nexus Curtain, it wasn't like he wanted to go out and share it with the world. He just wanted to shut it down or guard it, so nothing could get through from either side."

"Including us, maybe?" Ralph said, raising his eyebrows.

James shook his head. "Maybe, but I doubt it. If Franklyn had figured out the truth of the Nexus Curtain, I think he'd have told us when we asked him about it. I mean, he obviously doesn't want anyone snooping around about it, right? If he'd found it and shut it down, he'd just say so."

Ralph frowned. "Why?"

"Because," Zane answered, "we're just a bunch of curious kids, right? If he could have killed the mystery for us by telling us that he'd already *found* the Nexus Curtain and closed it for good, then there'd be nothing left for us to be curious about. Set and spike. Good one, James."

Ralph picked up the boot again. "Let's take the relics back down to the restricted section and get out of here. I've had enough creepy mystery for now."

Zane nodded. "Come on, then. We still have time to look up this Rowbitz dude tonight."

"I'll just wait up here, if you don't mind," James announced, shuffling his feet a little.

Zane glanced back, one eyebrow raised. "Sure, all right. What's the matter? You still hinky about Patches hiding out in the shelves?"

James shook his head. "No. I just... there's only the two relics. You guys don't really need me. Hurry back, all right?"

Ralph nodded. "The sooner the better. Come on."

A moment later, the door to the Archive's lower levels eased shut, leaving James alone in the hall of the Disrecorder.

He waited for a moment, listening intently, and then, when he was sure that Ralph and Zane had begun their descent to the restricted area, he reached into the back pocket of his jeans.

He'd been carrying Petra's dream story around in his pocket for days, folded into its seamless packet and encased in a plastic bag that he'd found in the kitchen of Apollo Mansion. He didn't know for sure why he had started keeping it with him, except that it seemed safer, somehow. He held the plastic bag gingerly between his thumb and forefinger and turned toward the Disrecorder.

The idea had come to him while they'd been watching the vision of Franklyn. The Disrecorder was only supposed to work on objects that had been especially enchanted, of course, but James couldn't help wondering. Ever since he had saved Petra's life on the back the *Gwyndemere*, the dream story had become too magical for him to touch directly. Perhaps, however, it was just magical enough to trigger something in the Disrecorder, something James could make sense of. James couldn't guess why Petra and her dream story seemed to possess such strange magical intensity, but he meant to find out. Even if it meant that he was, essentially, spying on her dreams. Gingerly, he tipped the plastic bag upside down over the stone bowl.

The parchment packet tumbled out and fell into the bowl with a tiny thump.

A gust of dry wind pushed past James suddenly, whipping his hair and forcing him to squint. He turned around on the spot, and dull brightness filled his vision. He was in daylight, standing atop a grassy plateau. The hall of the Archive had completely vanished. Even the stone pedestal of the Disrecorder itself was gone. This, James realized, was no hazy vision; it felt utterly solid, and yet surreal, as if every blade of dead grass was watching him and every cloud in the low, heaving sky was glowering down at him, coldly angry. The featureless grass of the plateau stretched away in all directions and James realized that the plateau was actually an island, surrounded by craggy cliffs. Slate grey waves slammed against the cliffs, sending spray up into the windy air.

And of course, there was the castle, jutting up in the near distance. It was made of black stone, small but so tall, so encrusted with towers and turrets, that it seemed to claw at the cloudy sky. The structure loomed over the edge of the cliff, as if the rocks had eroded away beneath it, and yet the castle still stood, held up by sheer bloody-minded determination.

Someone was watching from the darkness of the castle. James sensed the weight of their gaze like hot stones on his skin. He peered up at the castle, shading his eyes against the grey light. A figure was standing on a high balcony, obscured in shadow.

I have come, a voice said. The words echoed over the grassy plateau like thunder. *I watch and I wait. My time is very near. I am the Sorceress Queen. I am the Princess of Chaos.*

James strained his eyes, trying to see past the shadowy dimness of the balcony. He could barely make out the figure except that it appeared to be a woman. Her hair streamed darkly in the wind. When she spoke again, a slow chill came over James, freezing him to the spot. His eyes widened, and the vision began to intensify, to bleed and pulse, to shred apart, but the words rang on, echoing louder and louder, pounding James' ears to the point of pain.

I watch and I wait, the voice repeated. *My name will be known throughout all of the destinies.*
My name... is Morgan. She who strides between the worlds.

The vision shattered and flew apart. Darkness swirled, compressed, and vanished into a single dark point, which hovered over the pedestal of the Disrecorder like a hole in space. A moment later, even that winked from view.

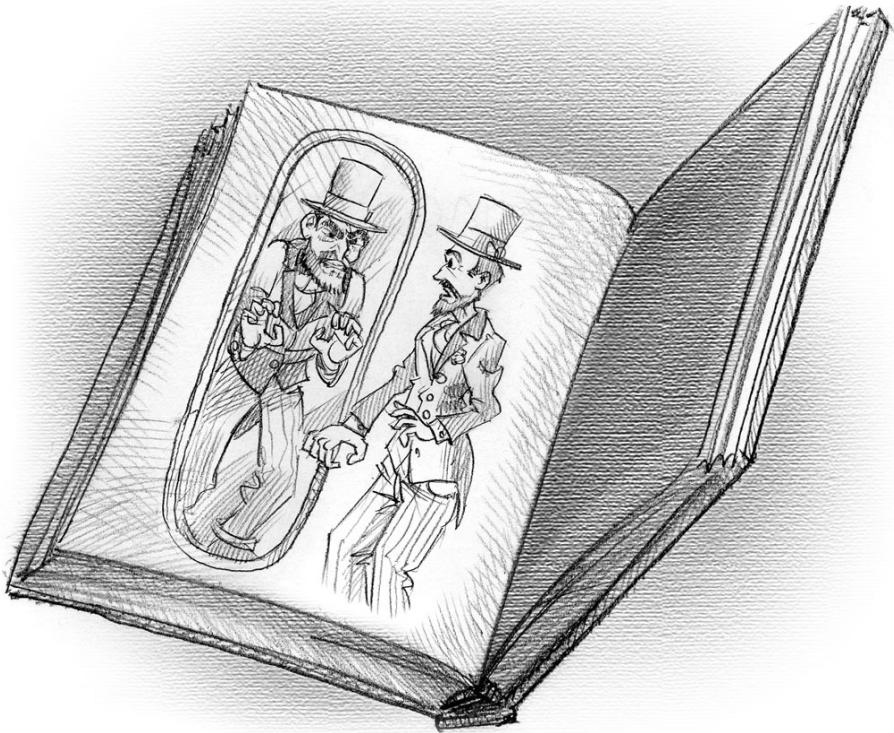
James stood rooted to the floor of the hall, his hair sticking up and his heart pounding.

It's just a dream, he told himself, repeating the words over and over. *It's just that part of Petra's mind—the Morgan part—wanting to get out. Petra has it locked away, imprisoned, under control. That's all it is. That must be all it is...*

James shuddered violently, remembering the hopeless toll of that dreaming voice.

Footsteps approached, accompanied by echoing voices; Zane and Ralph were returning. Quickly, James stepped forward to retrieve the dream story, but then he stopped, his eyes widening.

The bowl of the Disrecorder was empty. Petra's dream story had completely vanished.



15. THE STAR OF CONVERGENCE

Now that the Alma Aleron Halloween Ball had officially come and gone, the campus got down to the serious business of unwinding toward the winter holidays.

No sooner had the floating pumpkins in the cafeteria been taken down than a collection of papier-mâché turkeys and strange buckled hats had gone up in their place. Thanksgiving, the holiday that, according to Professor Sanuye, celebrated the successful harvest of the first American pilgrims (with the help and cooperation of the Native Americans whom they'd met there) seemed to be a surprisingly big deal among the Alma Aleron students and faculty. Most of them were making plans to go home over the long weekend, where they would apparently eat lots of roasted turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie and listen to or attend a lot of commemorative sporting events, including a blockbuster professional Clutchcudgel match known as the Superbrawl.

Curious about the details of such a quintessentially American holiday, James and Ralph shamelessly invited themselves to Zane's family home near St. Louis, Missouri for the Walker's Thanksgiving dinner. Zane's father, communicating via James' owl, Nobby, happily agreed to host the boys.

Thus, on the last weekend of November, the three boys traveled by train to a small old station in the quaint little city of Kirkwood, which Zane proudly proclaimed as 'the first official suburb of St. Louis'. This fact was woefully lost on James and Ralph, however, who were both preoccupied with the narrow, snow-dusted streets and brightly lit Christmas decorations that

adorned the city's lampposts. As the three boys waited in the purple dusk for Zane's parents to pick them up, they peered across the street to where a gaggle of gaily dressed Muggles milled around an artificial forest of neatly cut and arranged pine trees. Occasionally, a minivan or car would motor out onto the street with one of the trees tied to the roof by a length of twine.

"People around here get started early with their Christmases, don't they?" Ralph said with a happy smile. "I could get used to that, I bet."

"That's nothing," Zane replied. "There's a family in the block next to my house that leaves their Christmas tree up all year long. True story."

James frowned. "Are they magical folk?"

"Nah," Zane answered easily. "They're just weird. Here comes my mom!"

The boys waved and collected their duffle bags as a white car pulled into the circle drive that fronted the train station. It still gave James an odd sensation whenever he saw someone driving from the left side of the car, but Zane, of course, thought nothing of it. He climbed into the front seat with his mother, an attractive blonde woman wearing tortoise-shell glasses. She smiled back at Ralph and James as they clambered into the back.

"Hi boys," she announced, offering each one a cookie from a paper bag. "Welcome to Kirkwood. Hope you're hungry."

"I am," Ralph agreed eagerly. "Mmm! Chocolate chip cookies. And are those chunks of cherry?"

"Still hot too!" Zane nodded, his mouth full.

"Just came out of the oven ten minutes ago," Zane's mother concurred, steering the car back out onto the street. "Greer stayed home with her father, watching the last batch, but she's just as excited as we are to have you all over for the holiday."

James watched the small town unroll past the windows of the car until they reached a neighborhood of little houses and neat yards, not unlike the area surrounding the Alma Aleron gate. Zane's mother slowed and angled up a short drive toward a simple stone house perched on a hill.

"Home sweet home!" Zane announced eagerly, already opening his door. "Dad's got the fire going, I bet!"

"That's not very hard," his mother commented. "It's a gas fireplace. But I'm sure you're right."

As the four climbed out of the car, the back door of the house swept open and a head of curly blonde hair poked out, lit brightly by the overhead light.

"Dad's carving the turkey," the girl called, "but I can't get him to stop eating it as he goes. You better get in here right away."

Zane's mother sighed with weary affection.

"Hi Greer!" Zane called to his younger sister, waving, and then turned to James and Ralph, shaking his head happily. "Some things never change. Come on inside, I'll show you my room!"

Thanksgiving at the Walker family home turned out to be not unlike any family gathering that James had known back at Marble Arch. The dining room was rather small, and by the time Zane's aunt and uncle had arrived with their two younger children, the house rang with a cacophony of overlapping sounds: laughter and conversation, the clank of dishes, the burble of Christmas carols from the kitchen radio, the staccato of clambering footsteps as Zane's cousins and sister ran about the small house. Zane and Ralph spent a goodly amount of time playing video games on the family television, although James could never quite get the hang of them. The food was excellent and apparently never-ending, so that by Thanksgiving evening, James felt utterly stuffed. The family gathered around the table to play board games and James joined in, even though he had never heard of any of the games, and had no idea how to play them.

"Sorry, James," Zane announced happily as James marched his marker around the board. "You owe me two hundred bucks. Enjoy your commute, and thank you for patronizing Reading Railroad."

"He's ruthless about those railroads," Ralph commented as James counted out the last of his brightly coloured play money. "If I had known how much money those could make, I wouldn't have wasted all mine on these stupid utilities."

James had no idea what any of it meant, but he didn't mind. It was an excellent time, no matter what. He grinned as he handed the play money to Zane, and reached for one of the last cookies on a nearby plate. One more bite couldn't hurt. He decided he'd take chocolate-cherry cookies over fake money any day.

Over the course of the holiday weekend, James and Ralph shared the Walkers' guest bedroom, sleeping on a pair of narrow old beds. On Sunday afternoon, while Ralph, Zane and Greer played video games, James explored the small house alone. In the small corner office, he found Mr. Walker hunched over his desk, tapping furiously away at a laptop computer. His face was tense and scowling, as if he was wrestling with the tiny keys.

"What're you working on?" James asked, leaning in the doorway.

Walker looked up, his eyes wide and surprised, and James realized that the man hadn't noticed his approach.

"Ah!" he said, and smiled. "Sorry. I get pretty wrapped up in this sometimes. Hi James."

"I didn't mean to interrupt you or anything," James said quickly. "I was just curious."

Walker sighed and leaned back in his chair, stretching. "It's fine. I need people to remind me to take a break sometimes. Zane's mother says that when I'm writing, it's like I'm a hundred feet underwater. It takes a long time to get down there, and a long time to swim back to the surface, so when I am there, it's easy to forget everything else."

"I thought you made movies?" James asked, frowning.

Walker shrugged and bobbed his head. "I make stuff," he said. "Sometimes I make things for movies, sometimes I draw pictures, sometimes I write stories."

James was curious. "Do people read what you write? Like, are your stories in bookstores and stuff?"

Walker laughed and shook his head. "No, my books don't end up on any store shelves. Fortunately, though, I do get paid for the *other* things I make. Well enough, in fact, that I have the freedom to do *some* things just for the fun of it. That's what the writing is for."

James frowned quizzically. "You write for fun?"

"No better reason," Walker sighed, flexing his fingers.

"So what are you writing now?"

Walker pursed his lips and shook his head. "Just a little story."

James narrowed his eyes at the man. For some reason, he suspected that Mr. Walker was purposely avoiding any further explanation. James peered toward the screen of the laptop. Without his glasses, the image was merely a blur of lines, but he thought he could make out a group of words in boldface. The title, perhaps? For a moment, he thought he saw his own name there. He shook his head and blinked. That was ridiculous, of course.

Mr. Walker turned the computer slightly, and clicked a button. The text on the screen disappeared.

James noticed a small volume perched on the end of the desk. He gestured toward it. "Is that one of your books?"

Walker scooped the book up. "This? No. This is a classic. I was using it for research. It's called 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde'. Ever hear of it?"

James shook his head.

"It's an old story," Walker said, letting the book fall open on his palm. "A horror story, but a psychological one. That's what makes it so scary, really."

"What do you mean?" James asked, peering at the book.

Walker flipped the pages until he came to an illustration. In it, a man in coat-tails and a top hat was standing before a floor-length mirror. He was staring with wide-eyed terror at his own reflection, and it was no wonder: the reflection in the mirror was a different man entirely. The figure in the mirror was leering, grinning, with hands hooked into claws and boggling, mad eyes.

"Because," Walker replied thoughtfully, "this isn't just a story about a madman wreaking havoc on the innocent. This is a story where the villain and the hero cannot physically fight one another, where there is no clear-cut moment of confrontation between them, where one can win out over the other."

James stared at the image on the page and felt a pall of uneasiness settle over him. "Why not?" he asked in a low voice.

"Well, it's very simple," Walker said, glancing up at James seriously. "It's because the villain and the hero... are the same person."

James nodded slowly, unable to take his eyes away from the illustration on the page. In it, two different personalities stared at each other from within the same body, divided only by the mirror glass.

In the warmth of the small office room, James shivered.

A moment later he dismissed himself and went to find Zane and Ralph. All of a sudden, he wanted nothing more than to be around his friends, to hear their raucous laughter, and to forget that strange, old illustration.

The return trip to Alma Aleron, like all post-holiday journeys, was melancholy and quiet. Zane spent the train ride with his nose buried in a thick book called *The Varney Guide to Who's Who in the Wizarding World*. James tried to read over his shoulder at one point, but almost immediately found the book unforgivably boring. Instead, he challenged Ralph to a game of wizard chess, using a miniature box set of chess pieces that Ralph had taken to carrying with him wherever he went. James hated playing chess with Ralph since he nearly always lost to the bigger boy, but even losing was better than simply staring out the windows at the passing, dreary cities and rainy sky.

The next day, Zane cornered Ralph and James in the hall outside of Mageography.

"I know who Rowbitz is," he said, his eyes bulging in his face.

"What?" Ralph frowned. "I thought you said he wasn't anywhere in that book?"

"He wasn't," Zane agreed. "It was a complete waste of time. Now, my head's all stuffed full of useless names and trivia, and all for nothing. Like, did you know that the wizard who invented the skrim was some crazy dude named Vimrich who was just looking for a way to nap while he was riding his broom? He never got it to work—the flattened broom just kept flipping over and dropping him on the floor—but after he died, some of his nephews found the homemade brooms in his workshop and tried standing up on them. The rest is history."

"Fascinating," James said impatiently. "Get to the Rowbitz part."

"Hey, if I had to learn it, *you* have to put up with hearing about it," Zane proclaimed, poking James in the chest. "But anyway, when I took the book back to the library this morning, I noticed something hanging on the wall. You know how the Vampire girls are always making those charcoal etchings of the gravestones in the school cemetery? Well, a bunch of them are hanging up by the librarian's desk; must have been some kind of class art project or something. The point is, guess whose name showed up on the one right by the return cart?"

"Rowbitz?" Ralph blinked, surprised.

Zane nodded eagerly. "Right there, plain as day! It was spelled a little different than I expected—R-O-E-bitz, but close enough to play Clutch, as we Zombies say. He was just some old guy from way back in the day, lived and worked here on campus, apparently. Probably he was like Magnussen's servant or gardener or something!"

“The Nexus Curtain lies within the eyes of Roebitz,” James quoted, nodding. “Maybe the key to the Curtain is buried with the guy!”

“OH no,” Ralph raised his hands, palms out. “I’m not going and digging up any old graves.”

Zane put an arm around Ralph’s shoulders, standing on tiptoes to reach. “Don’t worry, Ralph,” he said soothingly. “We won’t need to dig anybody up, all right?”

“We won’t?” the bigger boy replied skeptically.

Zane shook his head. “Nah. I could tell by the etching that it was from a mausoleum. We don’t need to dig at all. We just need to pry the door open with a crowbar.”

“Oh,” Ralph sighed sarcastically. “Well, that’s loads better.”



Over the following days, James, Ralph, and Zane explored the campus cemetery, which was surprisingly large, huddled in the northwest corner of the campus and surrounded by a tall wrought-iron fence. Fortunately, the main gate was almost always left open, even at night, which meant that they wouldn’t have to climb the fence if they had to sneak in by moonlight. After a few attempts, the three finally found the mausoleum belonging to a wizard named Leopold Cromwel Roebitz, which sat embedded in a hill in the shadow of an ancient oak tree. The mausoleum door was made of copper, weathered to a pale green patina. Zane gripped the handle and gave it a tentative tug, but the door didn’t budge.

“Well, so much for Plan A,” he said, nodding. “Door’s locked. Anyone want to try an Unlocking Spell? How about you, Ralphinator? You’re the spellmeister of the group.”

Ralph grimaced, but produced his wand. He leveled its lime green tip at the door. “*Alohomora*,” he said tentatively.

There was a golden flash, but the door remained firmly closed. Zane yanked the handle once more to no avail.

“I guess that means Plan C, eh?” James said.

Ralph asked hopefully, “Can’t we just try it now?”

"And risk getting hauled into the office as vandals?" Zane replied, batting Ralph on the shoulder. "Trust me, it's one thing to get caught hexing your name onto a statue. Messing around with the dead means a whole different kind of trouble. You saw how serious they took it when Magnussen was stealing bodies to dissect them."

Ralph sighed. "Fine. But if we have to do this at night, *I'm* not going inside. I'll be waiting right here next to this old tree while you two go bumping around with the skeletons. Got it?"

James agreed. "Wouldn't have it any other way, Ralph."

It was the following weekend before the three boys could summon the courage to make the nighttime trek to the cemetery. Even Zane, whose audacity normally seemed to be limitless, appeared jumpy about the endeavor. On Saturday night, James and Ralph stayed up late in the game room of Apollo Mansion, playing ping pong and enduring the constant critiques of Heckle and Jeckle. Finally, when the grandfather clock in the corner struck midnight, the boys crept up the stairs and eased open the front door. They looked at each other, standing between the coldness of the night and the warmth of the hall behind them.

"You up for this, Ralph?" James asked in a whisper.

"No," Ralph admitted. "But we're going to do it anyway, right?"

James nodded and gulped. "Remember why we're doing it. It's for a good cause. We can't let Petra take the blame for something she didn't do. We have to find the people who really broke into the Hall of Archives and attacked the Vault of Destinies."

Ralph shook his head. "But... we *saw* her, James. What makes you so sure that it wasn't really her?"

In the past, James would have felt angry about such a question, but he knew Ralph better now. He knew that Ralph was a pragmatist. Besides, Ralph didn't feel the same way about Petra that James did. He didn't know what James knew.

"Because she told me," James said simply, meeting his friend's gaze. After a moment, he added, "When we were on the ship, Dad told me that the best thing I could do for Petra was to be her friend. Friends trust one another, and that's what I am doing for her. Do you trust me?"

Ralph shrugged. "Sometimes," he answered seriously. "But mostly I just back your plays. That's the best way *I* know how to be a friend. That's what tonight's about. I hope that's good enough."

James smiled despite the cold and stillness of the night. Slowly, he pulled the door of Apollo Mansion closed behind them. "That's more than good enough, Ralph. Come on."

As James and Ralph stole into the darkness, they found the campus eerily quiet, covered in low, creeping tendrils of fog. The air was so cold that James immediately began to shiver. Overhead, the half moon shone brightly, covering the lawns and footpaths with its bony light.

"Over there," Ralph whispered, his breath making puffs of mist in the air. "Is that Zane hunkered down by the Octosphere?"

In answer, a poor imitation of an owl echoed across the dark lawn. James rolled his eyes.

"You didn't do the countersign," Zane rasped as James and Ralph ran to join him. "I hoot, you bray like wolves. We practiced it this afternoon."

"And I told you *then*," James whispered, looking about at the empty campus, "we're in a time bubble in the middle of major American city. There aren't any wolves for miles and centuries in every direction!"

"There would've been if you'd have done the countersign," Zane groused.

"Did you bring the Grint?" James asked, glancing at the blonde boy.

Zane hugged himself, shivering. "You mean the standard Zombie tool for magically picking locks that any self-respecting Zombie carries with him every time he goes out on an evening sneak? *That* Grint? No, I left it in your grandma's sock drawer. Silly me."

James nodded. "All right, then. Looks like the coast is clear. Let's go."

Together, the three boys ran along a line of leafless elms, hunkering low and keeping as much in shadow as possible. They skirted the front of the theater, crossed the mall in front of Administration Hall, and ducked into the warren of footpaths that ran through a block of college student apartments. Finally, his lungs raw from the cold night air, James looked up and saw the gates of the campus cemetery gaping open before him. Tentacles of mist crept like lazy ghosts between the nearest gravestones, beyond which was impenetrable darkness.

"Why's there have to be so many big willow trees and shrubberies and stuff?" Ralph whispered as they tiptoed through the gates. "I mean, it's a cemetery, not a hedge maze."

"Blame it on the old groundskeeper, Balpine Bludgeny," James replied, his teeth chattering. "He's what you call a traditionalist. Makes sure all the gates creak, all the trees are covered with Spanish moss, and the headstones lean *just so*. Gotta love a guy who takes that kind of pride in his work."

The three boys huddled unconsciously together as they followed the winding path through the hills of the cemetery. Shortly, they rounded a curve and found themselves out of sight of the main entrance. Moss-covered statues and obelisks loomed in silhouette out of the misty shadows. Not so much as a breath of wind moved the trees or the ever-present ground mist.

"I think it's over there," Ralph whispered, pointing up a nearby hill. "Can't we light our wands?"

Zane shook his head. "Somebody will see us. Your eyes will get used to the dark soon enough."

James led the way up the hill, skirting the leaning headstones. Suddenly, unbidden, he remembered his father's infrequent stories about the last days before the Battle of Hogwarts, when he and Headmaster Dumbledore had broken into a cave where Voldemort had hidden one of his many Horcruxes. Specifically, James found himself thinking of the cursed dead that occupied that cave's deep lake, flailing to the surface like beastly, gaping fish: *Inferi*. James shuddered and tried not to

envision dead white hands scrabbling up out of the ground, clutching at his ankles. He actually found himself hoping for a good old-fashioned ghost, just to break the tension. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, Alma Aleron apparently didn't have any ghosts. He drew a deep breath and shuddered as he let it out.

"There it is," Zane nodded, angling toward the crest of the hill. "*Roebitz*. I can just read it by the light of the moon. Come on."

James watched as Zane retrieved a small complicated tool from a pocket in the recesses of his cloak. The blonde boy examined the keyhole beneath the mausoleum's door handle and then peered down to fiddle with the Grint.

"How's it work?" Ralph asked, leaning close.

"It's got a little imp locksmith in it," Zane replied. "He sniffs out what sort of lock he's dealing with and pops out whatever tool is best to get it open."

Ralph frowned and glanced at James. "Is he making that up?"

"You never can tell, can you?" James answered, shaking his head.

Zane leaned close to the door, squinted into the keyhole, and then pressed an ear to the cold metal, listening. "Nobody moving around inside," he said, peering back at James and Ralph. "Always a good sign."

James was impatient. "Can you get it open?"

"No problem," Zane nodded. "Nothing special here. Looks like a standard Mourning Rose double-tongued turnbolt. I looked them up this afternoon at the library. It's a basic mortuary homunculus lock. The key is tears."

"Like, one of us has to cry?" James asked, blinking.

Ralph frowned. "How do you cry on command? Maybe you should try it, James. You're the actor, aren't you?"

"I've only ever been in one play," James protested. "And it didn't require any waterworks. *I* don't know how to make myself cry."

Ralph's eyes widened with inspiration. "You just think about the saddest thing that's ever happened to you! Like, when your first pet died or something! It's easy!"

"I've never *had* any pets die yet," James replied. "If it's so easy, *you* do it then."

"You guys coming in or what?" Zane asked, pushing the copper door open. It creaked ponderously, revealing darkness beyond.

James boggled. "How'd you do that?"

"I just picked it," Zane shrugged, pocketing the Grint. "I figured that'd be faster than waiting for you to get all misty-eyed. I think I broke the lock a little, but we can fix it on the way out, eh? Let's go."

"I'll, er, keep watch," Ralph whispered nervously, backing away. James nodded, sighed, and then followed Zane into the musty darkness of the mausoleum.

It was very cold inside with a low ceiling and a gritty floor that scraped loudly under the boys' feet. Zane raised his wand slowly.

"*Lumos*," he whispered harshly. The wand sprang alight, filling the tiny space with its harsh glow. The interior of the mausoleum was completely unmarked. Cobwebs filled the corners, wafting with the boys' movements. The only objects in the cramped space were an old floor brazier with one remaining candle and a low stone shelf, upon which sat the unmistakable shape of a wooden casket.

"I opened the front door," Zane said in a low voice, eyes wide. "Now that we're inside, *you* can do the honors."

James gulped and stepped forward. The casket was cold to the touch. Slowly, he curled his fingers around the metal handle of the casket's lid and began to lift it. It creaked loudly as it opened, and James wondered for a moment if Balpine Bludgeny had been in here as well, hexing the hinges of the casket so that they made the proper deep groan when opened in the dead of night. James leaned aside and peered into the narrow opening he'd created. A wash of relief flooded over him.

"It's empty," he breathed. "Just darkness. It must be a dummy grave, set up as a hiding place for the—"

James interrupted himself with a little shriek as Zane stepped forward, bringing his lit wand with him. The casket wasn't empty after all; the interior had merely been obscured by shadow. A mouldering skeleton lay inside, dressed in an old-fashioned suit with a string tie and a desiccated carnation lying flat in the buttonhole. The skeletal hands were crossed neatly over the thin chest. A gold tooth glimmered in the skull's leering grin.

"Ugh!" James said, nearly dropping the casket's lid. "Urk!"

Zane shook his head impatiently. "It's just a dead body, James. Sheesh. I thought you saw one of these come to life once in the cave of Merlin's cache?"

James gulped again. "That was different, somehow. *He* was just out there in the open, like. You don't think this one's going to... you know...?"

"Get lively on us?" Zane asked, grinning. "Nah. Not unless you make him really mad, anyway. Let's get on with it. Like Magnussen said, the Nexus Curtain lies within the eyes of Roebitz. Let's take a look, already."

James pushed the casket lid the rest of the way open and Zane leaned over the top of it, bringing his wand low. The skull grinned up at the light. A shock of grey hair was still matted onto the skull, combed neatly back from the temples.

"Nothing in the eye sockets," Zane said, leaning close. "Just dust and a few cobwebs. Maybe somebody did beat us to it."

"The riddle said that the Nexus Curtain was *within the eyes* of Rowbitz," James mused. "Maybe it means that it's somewhere where the skeleton could see it?"

Zane shrugged. "Skeletons can't see anything, technically."

James ignored Zane and peered at the padded silk of the inside of the casket's lid. He touched it tentatively, feeling around for any hidden shapes.

"Hey!" Zane announced suddenly, leaning low over the casket again. James gasped and bent over the skeleton, following his friend's intent gaze. Zane pointed at the skeleton's left hand.

"He graduated in eighteen ten! Look! It's right there on his class ring. He was in Aphrodite Heights. Wow, I wouldn't have guessed him for a Pixie."

James sighed and straightened again. "Great. Well, this looks like another dead end."

"Hah hah," Zane grinned, nudging James with his elbow.

"Let's go. I'm freezing," James said, lowering the casket's lid with another long creak. "Maybe there isn't anything to all of this after all. Maybe Magnussen was just playing with Franklyn, giving him meaningless hints."

Zane shrugged and extinguished his wand. Both boys turned and crept back out into the night.

"Ralph?" Zane rasped loudly, glancing around.

"Where is he?" James asked, peering around as well. "I thought he was going to be sitting here under this—" He stopped, noticing a dark shape lying flattened on the frosty ground beneath the elm tree. It was Ralph's cloak. Zane saw it too and glanced up at James, his eyes widening.

"Ralph?" James whispered, peering around at the shadowy gravestones. Suddenly, the graveyard seemed to be packed full of hiding places and dark recesses, where any number of awful things might be watching, preparing to pounce. Nervously, James rasped, "This isn't funny, Ralph!"

A noise came from behind the nearby elm tree: a heavy thump. Both boys jumped and grabbed at one another.

"Ralph?" Zane asked, his voice quavering.

Another thump sounded, closer this time. James and Zane began to back away, peering around for the source of the strange noises. The graveyard sat perfectly still, as if watching them. An owl hooted suddenly, sounding very loud and horribly mournful. James looked about wildly, his hair prickling.

"Ralph?" Zane whispered once more, still gripping James' elbow. "Is that you?"

Suddenly, both boys backed into a large, solid object. They stopped, eyes bulging. Slowly, terrified, they turned around, and looked up.

A very tall, vaguely human shape loomed over them. The skin of its face was papery, partly rotted away, revealing the mottled skull beneath. Two large bony hands raised slowly into the air, hooked into claws, and a deep rattling voice emanated from the thing's throat.

"Get... out... of... my... *yaaard!*" it said menacingly.

James and Zane nearly collapsed in terror, scrambling away from the awful figure. Just then, however, another voice spoke up some distance away.

"That's what he told me at first too," the voice said, speaking as if through a mouthful of biscuit. James tore his gaze from the figure that loomed over him, seeking the source of the second voice. Ralph stood in the open doorway of another mausoleum, happily munching a large pink sugar cookie. He shrugged. "He's really just a big softie. Name's Straidhwait. Says he used to be president of your house, Zane."



"Charles Straidhwait," the zombie introduced himself once the three boys were seated inside his mausoleum. Despite his morbid appearance, the figure's speech had a disarming Southern lilt that Zane later claimed was a Charleston, South Carolina accent. "Former President of Hermes House, Arithmatics professor, retired, at your service. You'll have to excuse me for all that creeping and thumping and grumpiness. Comes with the territory, I'm afraid."

"He's the one I told you guys about," Zane enthused happily, accepting a cup of hot coffee from the shambling figure. "He's the Zombie House President that traveled to the darkest jungles and got himself turned into the real thing!"

"A word of advice," Straidhwait nodded, easing himself into a chair, "never accept any smoking 'peace potions' from a witch doctor whose hut you've accidentally burned to the ground. Long story. Suffice it to say, here I am, dead and loving it."

"I've seen your mausoleum loads of times," Zane said, grinning, "but the door was always closed and everything was quiet. We all just assumed that you spent all your time sort of sleeping or something. Like being a real-life zombie was just a big long Rip Van Winkle nap, like!"

"If only that were so," the undead teacher lamented. "I've had trouble sleeping for the last decade or so. I don't have any trouble *getting* to sleep, mind, but I wake up early, usually after only three or four months. Age takes its toll. Er, I do apologize," Straidhwait said, leaning forward and plucking something from the edge of Zane's saucer. "Pinky finger," he said apologetically, holding the digit up. "Keeps coming off lately. Maybe you boys would be kind enough to bring me some plumber's putty and tape if you decided to come by again?"

Ralph nodded. "Nice place you have here, I gotta say. I'm surprised."

"No reason you should be," Straithwait replied, looking around at the cramped space. It was, indeed, rather nicely laid out, with four upholstered (if slightly moldy) chairs, a small ornate coffee table, and two kerosene lamps, all arranged upon a threadbare oriental rug. Straithwait's coffin lay open on its shelf, neatly made like a bed. In the corner nearest the door sat a tiny potbelly stove, supporting a kettle and a small tin percolator. It was almost unbearably hot inside the stone mausoleum, but none of the boys minded.

"I dictated exactly how I wished to be interred," Straithwait went on proudly. "Including an afterlifetime supply of iced cookies, coffee, tea, and condensed milk. Stuff goes straight through me these days, but I don't mind. Hard to experience indigestion if one no longer sports a stomach. Good riddance, I say. So who, may I ask, are the three of you, and what brings you out to my neck of the woods at such an hour?"

Over the next few minutes, the boys introduced themselves and explained their mission to the patiently decrepit corpse of Professor Straithwait, describing the attack on the Hall of Archives, Petra's alleged involvement, and their attempts to find the real culprits. Once James had finished relating the Disrecorded visions of Professor Magnussen and his two riddles, Straithwait nodded to himself meaningfully.

"I remember it well, actually," he said, peering up at the ceiling with his one remaining eye. "I was still a student when the Magnussen ruckus occurred. My friends and I, as well as most of the school, were completely maddened by it. It was one thing to break the code of secrecy and torture people. But to kill a defenseless Muggle woman, and one as young as Fredericka Staples..." Straithwait shook his head slowly. "Abominable. Unforgivable."

James asked, "Did you know her?"

"No, no," Straithwait admitted. "Not until after it was over, when her name appeared in all of the newspapers of both the magical and Muggle varieties. After Magnussen's escape, there was a lengthy investigation by the Magical Integration Bureau, months and months of very ticklish interactions between the Muggle and wizarding powers that be. By the end of it, none of us would ever forget the poor woman's name or that of her murderer, that horrible psychopath, Ignatius Magnussen."

Zane sat forward in his chair. "So what about this whole Roebitz riddle business? Do you think there's anything to it?"

Straithwait let out a rattly sigh and tapped his coffee cup with one bony index finger. "I barely knew Professor Magnussen as anything more than a rather feared professor, and then as a famous escaped murderer, but I don't think he'd leave meaningless clues. He was too arrogant for that. Still, I'd have a difficult time believing that poor old Leo Roebitz had anything to do with it. He hadn't even died yet when Magnussen disappeared. No, I'm afraid you boys are chasing the proverbial feral waterfowl."

James released a disappointed sigh. "Now we'll never find out where the Nexus Curtain is," he muttered.

Straidhwait perked up a little at that. "Did you actually think," he said, peering at James, "that the Nexus Curtain would be found inside the casket of a dead wizard literature teacher?"

James bristled a little. "Well, it's magic, isn't it? It could be anywhere. We were just following the clues."

"Yes," Straidhwait chuckled drily. "I suppose that *is* one way to go about it. Following clues. Of course, if it were me, I'd follow Magnussen himself, instead."

"How are we going to do that?" Zane asked, tilting his head. "He's only been vanished for a hundred and fifty years or so."

"Yeah," Ralph added. "And nobody saw where he went anyway. They were all too busy watching his house burn down."

"It wasn't his house," Straidhwait replied pedantically, raising a skeletal finger. "It was the house of John Danforth Roberts, one of the three founders of this school, God rest his soul. And I wouldn't be quite so hasty about who saw what on that particular night."

James narrowed his eyes at the mouldering professor. "What do you mean?"

"I'd imagine it was quite obvious at this point," Straidhwait said, making a rather ghastly smile. "I witnessed Magnussen's escape."

"But," Ralph began, squinting thoughtfully. "But, Franklyn said, in the Disrecorder vision, that nobody saw Magnussen escape. He said they were all too distracted by the fire."

"Alas, I had my own reasons for keeping my observations a secret," Straidhwait admitted, leaning back in his chair. "Not that they'd have done anyone any good, I suspect."

Zane asked, "Is there a story that goes with that?"

"Not much of a one, I'm afraid," Straidhwait sighed. "You see, I had recently become enamored with a fetching young lady by the name of Charlotte. She lived in Erebus Mansion and had a delightfully wicked mind. She occupied me for many hours during that autumn—hours that would have been far more responsibly spent on my studies. As a result, I was failing Mageography quite disastrously. My teacher, Professor Howard Styrnwether, had confronted me about my failing grades, demanding that I not throw my future away for some 'made-up strumpet', as he called her."

"He was right, of course, but I was *livid*. In fury, I abandoned the Mageography essay I had barely begun and instead wrote an entirely new essay consisting of precisely five words, which glowed green on the parchment and read as follows: 'Dearest Professor Styrnwether—Get Stuffed'."

Zane hooted with laughter. "That's excellent! I see why you were President of Zombie House."

Straidhwait nodded, smiling despite himself. "Yes, well, I might never have achieved such a position if it had not been for the events that followed. You see, I handed the essay in after a night of affronted anger, emboldened by Charlotte herself and not a few Dragonmeades in the Kite and Key. Almost instantly, however, I regretted the act. If Styrnwether failed me in Mageography, the chances were that I would never get accepted to the graduate school, and if I didn't get accepted to the

graduate school, I'd never receive my doctorate in Advanced Arithmatics, which meant I could never become a teacher and grow to be the distinguished and revered undead professor you see before you now.

"Thus, I pined for a means to retrieve the essay before it was too late. Unfortunately, Professor Styrnwether had already begun grading the essays. I hovered near his office door, peeking in, looking for any opportunity to sneak in and steal back the insulting essay. Styrnwether, unfortunately, did not pause for so much as a bathroom break, and I began to fear the worst.

"Shortly, however, I overheard the brouhaha stewing in the lawn outside. I looked out a nearby window and saw the crowd gathering, saw the flames beginning to lick from the lower windows of Magnussen's residence. I had heard about the travesty of Magnussen's crimes, of course, and knew that tensions had been mounting, ever since the decision had been made to allow him to maintain his post during the investigation.

"I immediately ran out to join the mob, as much out of curiosity as malice, although, I admit, there *was* some malice in my own thoughts as well. As the night drew in and the flames grew brighter and hotter, enveloping the unfortunate home of the former John Roberts, I spied, in the milling crowd, the humorless features of Professor Styrnwether. He was watching from a distance, his arms folded disapprovingly.

"Perhaps it is a testament to my own sense of self-preservation, but I found myself immediately inspired. At once, I darted away from the flames, into the nearby faculty offices. The halls were completely deserted, of course, and I breathed a great sigh of relief as I retrieved my essay, ungraded, from the stack on Professor Styrnwether's desk.

"I immediately produced my wand and obliterated the damning parchment. Finding a new parchment in the professor's desk, I quickly scribbled an apology for the fact that my essay would be a day late and promised to accept with good grace whatever penalty he deemed such tardiness deserved. I slipped this back into the stack of essays and, feeling a hundred pounds lighter, made my way back out into the darkening evening.

"It was then, as I was skirting the buildings, some distance from the conflagration, that I saw him. Professor Magnussen was an unmistakable figure, tall and solid, with stony features and a crown of very short grey hair. I feared for a moment that he had seen me and ducked into the bushes next to the guest house. The professor strode on, however, his gait full of purpose, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I feared him, you see, on that night more than any other. I considered bravery, but only for a moment. I was only a student, of course, and Magnussen was a much feared wizard, even before he was known to be a torturer and a murderer. Thus, I watched."

James was spellbound. "Where did he go? Did you see him open the Nexus Curtain?"

Straidhwait shook his head. "I did not. The truth is, if indeed Magnussen did escape through the Nexus Curtain, then he did not do so immediately. He left the campus first. I watched him, even heard him, for my hiding place was quite near the Warping Willow. That is where he went. When he was under its branches, he spoke only one word. A moment later, he vanished. As far as I know, no witch or wizard ever saw him again."

There was a moment of tense silence as the boys thought about this. Finally, James said, “What was the one word?”

“The word was ‘*Abitus*’,” Straithwait answered somberly. “It is a simple spell which conjures an exit to the currently relevant date and time—the now. Magnussen left the campus that night and escaped into Muggle Philadelphia. I know not where he was going, but if all the suspicions about him are true, I have my ideas.”

“You think he was going to the Nexus Curtain?” James asked, wide-eyed. “You think maybe it wasn’t on campus at all?”

“Perhaps,” Straithwait shrugged slowly, and then leaned forward. In a rasping whisper, he added, “Or perhaps... he was going to get the key.”

“The key...,” Ralph repeated slowly. “Like, maybe whatever it was, it was too dangerous for him to keep on campus?”

“Because whatever it was,” Zane went on, realization dawning on him, “it would be way too magical to leave in his offices! People would sense something that powerful, especially if it came from another dimension!”

Straithwait leaned back again, using his index finger to tap the side of where his nose used to be. “My thoughts precisely,” he concurred. “Because there is one thing that is for certain: whatever this alleged pan-dimensional key may have been, Magnussen was *not* carrying it on his person that night. If so, he’d never have been able to escape unnoticed. He may well have been on his way to the Nexus Curtain, *if* such a thing truly exists, but if he was... *then he was going to retrieve the key first.*”

“So,” Ralph announced after a meaningful pause, “if we can somehow find a way to follow Magnussen... we can find the key.”

“Find the key,” Straithwait mused, “and I expect the Nexus Curtain will reveal itself.”

Zane shook his head. “But how do we follow someone whose been gone for a century and a half?”

“Mercy, young man, you say you’re a member of Zombie House,” Straithwait said, nodding at Zane. “I am surprised you haven’t already divined the answer to that question.”

“Give me a second, already,” Zane replied, piqued. “I’ve only had a minute to think about it.”

“And therein lies the solution, my friend.”

“How’s that?” James asked, somewhat frustrated. “Time is exactly our problem. Like, a hundred and fifty years worth of it.”

Straithwait sighed wearily. “No, boy. Time is your *solution*. Have you forgotten,” he said, leaning slightly forward, his remaining eye twinkling, “that this school is, in essence, one gigantic *time machine*?”

Shocked, the three boys looked at one another, their eyes widening slowly. In the dark heat of the mausoleum, Straidthwait chuckled hollowly.



In the wake of the interview with Charles Straidthwait, James had gotten a vague idea of what they needed to do next. Unfortunately, with the Christmas holiday approaching, bringing with it a wave of midterm examinations, there was very little freedom to plan any time-traveling adventures in pursuit of the long lost Ignatius Magnussen.

"Tell me again why, exactly, you are planning to do this," Rose asked disapprovingly from the Shard as James and Ralph practiced Shield Charms for the next day's Cursology exam. "Pardon me for saying that it all seems a tad complicated and ridiculous."

"It's simple," Ralph said, his tone of voice implying that he didn't quite understand the plan himself. "Whoever broke into the Vault of Destinies stole a crimson thread from some other dimension's version of the Loom. Normally, something that massively magical would be easy to track down since it'd be sending out waves of power like some kind of siren. For some reason, though, nobody's picked up the slightest trace of it, not even James' dad and the local police. Zane thinks that that's because the people that stole the thread used it as a key to open the Nexus Curtain and hide it in the World Between the Worlds, which is sort of like a hub that connects all the dimensions."

"Right," James agreed. "That's the only way the thieves could escape without being traced. We need to follow Magnussen into the past to nick *his* key to the Nexus Curtain. If we can figure out how to get through to the World Between the Worlds, then we can try to see who really did steal the thread and prove that Petra isn't really involved."

"And what will you do if this is all bilge and Morganstern really *is* the culprit?" Scorpius scowled from his side of the Shard. James had prepared himself for such a question.

"She's not, but even if she is, this is what friends do. She says she's innocent, and we're doing what we can to prove her case."

Scorpius narrowed his eyes and smirked slightly. "So you're doing this for *friendship*, are you?"

"You can't just rush into something like that anyway," Rose interrupted. "Time traveling is extremely dangerous business. You could do far more harm than good."

James sighed and rolled his eyes. He hadn't wanted to tell Rose and Scorpius about it at all, but Ralph, being his typical self, had been unable to resist telling them all about the midnight conversation with the undead Professor Straidhwait.

"We know, Rose," James proclaimed, trying to head her off. "It's Technomancy one-oh-one, all right? Accidentally step on a bug in the past and you change the whole present. Blah, blah, blah."

"But really, how bad can it be?" Ralph commented, sitting down on his bed. "I mean, James zapped himself a thousand years into the past and butted heads with Salazar Slytherin. He changed loads of things, but everything still seems just fine here in the present day."

Rose shook her head in annoyance. "One," she said, stabbing a finger into the air, "we don't know that James *didn't* change the present since everything we know is based on the history he affected. It may be that there *were* changes, but they weren't terribly important. Two," she stuck a second finger into the air, "just because James got lucky once, doesn't mean the three of you won't bollix things up royally this time out."

"We'll be careful, Rose," James insisted, lowering his wand and turning toward the Shard. "I know you're jealous because you can't come along with us and all, but that doesn't mean you have to try to scare us out of doing it."

"That's not it at all," Rose fumed, crossing her arms and flopping back against the sofa in the Gryffindor common room. Next to her, Scorpius grinned a little crookedly, apparently seeing the truth in James' words. "I'm smarter than you," Rose went on sulkily. "I know how much damage you lot can do, tinkering about with history. *And I* know that you'll barely think any of this out before you do it."

James shook his head. "We're plenty smart. We've thought about it loads."

"Oh?" Rose replied, her eyebrows shooting up. "Is that so? Well, then I assume you've already realized that there's no point in your attempting anything at all without first knowing *what*, precisely, this pan-dimensional key thing actually *is*?"

James rolled his eyes dramatically and spread his hands, as if to say, *well duh, of course we've already figured that much out*, but the effect was ruined by Ralph's querulous response.

"Er, no," he said, frowning, and James slumped. "We just thought we'd travel back to the day when Magnussen escaped and try to follow him into Muggle Philadelphia. He'd just lead us to the key, wouldn't he?"

"Nice to know you've given this some serious thought," Rose said wearily. "Have you asked yourselves how you'll even *recognize* the key?"

James looked at Ralph for a moment, and then glanced back at the Shard. "Well, I mean, it's a key. It'll be obvious, er, won't it?"

Scorpius spoke up now. “It could be anything, Potter. For instance, if your theory is accurate—and I’m not entirely sure that it is—then the ‘real thieves’, as you call them, have accessed this Nexus Curtain using a piece of red thread. Not exactly the most obvious pan-dimensional artifact in the world. Magnussen’s key could come in any shape or form. Were you perhaps planning on just walking up to him and saying, oi, Mr. Murderer sir, would you please be so kind as to give us this dimensional key thing, and never mind that we won’t know the difference if you just hand us a chunk of lint that you might happen to have in your pocket?” Scorpius smiled smugly at his wit.

“Well,” James began, but couldn’t immediately think of anything else to say. He glanced back at Ralph for help.

“We have another clue,” Ralph said, perking up. “Something about Erebus Castle. Magnussen said that the secret of the key walked around in the halls of Erebus Castle, or something like that. We just need to ask Lucy to take us on a tour. If we can figure out the riddle, then maybe we’ll know what the key is.”

“How hard can it be?” James nodded, grinning sheepishly.

Scorpius looked meaningfully at Rose as he asked James, “Why do you need Lucy’s permission to get into Erebus Castle?”

“That’s the House of the Vampires,” Ralph replied. “They’re totally wiggy about who they let inside to bump around. You have to get a member of Vampire House to chaperone you around the whole time.”

“Or you have to be a real-life vampire,” James added, rolling his eyes. “The President of their house, Professor Remora, says that Erebus Castle is a ‘sanctuary for any fellow wandering Children of the Night’. As if there are any of *those* in America.”

Rose looked vaguely disgusted. “Did she actually say that? Children of the Night?”

“She says loads of stuff like that,” James nodded. “She’s completely batty.”

“Hah hah!” Ralph added, nudging James with his elbow. James groaned.



As the final days of the autumn semester unwound, James spent most of his time cramming (as Zane called it) for his semifinals. His fellow Bigfoots were a great help in that endeavor, forming spontaneous study groups in the game room of Apollo Mansion. There, Jazmine Jade, Gobbins, Wentworth, Norrick, Mukthatch, and anyone else who happened to be in the same classes would produce all of their notes and quiz one another for hours on end, all while consuming vast quantities of licorice soda and snacks from the Apollo kitchen.

Occasionally, Yeats would drift through the room with a trash bag, collecting empty cans, cups, and candy wrappers, all the while muttering insincere apologies through his gritted teeth for interrupting the students' studies. Heckle and Jeckle hung near the cellar refrigerator and called out wrong answers to any quiz questions they overheard. James learned that Heckle, the deer head, answered wrongly on purpose, in the hopes of starting arguments with passersby. Jeckle, the moose head, however, got the answers wrong because he was, essentially, a moose head.

It was thanks to these study sessions, which often lasted well into the night, that James finished his last week of school before the Christmas break with a somewhat giddy sense of confidence. His final test, a three-page practical in Precognitive Engineering, was possibly the hardest of all. For the two-hour examination period, James and the rest of the students were given three separate divining tools—a small crystal ball, a cup of tea leaves, and a random selection of octocards—and instructed to recount on parchment their predictions, being careful to assure that they were a) accurate, b) measurable, and c) essentially in agreement.

This meant, James knew, that the second half of the test, which would occur sometime during the spring semester, would be a rigorous detailing of how the predictions did or did not come true. If this had been Professor Trelawney's class, James would have been less concerned about that second part—predictions for her class were always expected to be purposely vague and rather comically disastrous. The American Precog teacher, however, Professor Ham Thackery, was a fussy little man with a much different approach to the 'science of divination', as he called it. He frowned upon disastrous, major prophecies, preferring instead smaller, more measurable predictions regarding things like what colour bird might next fly past a specific window, or the number of candies in a box of Every Flavor Beans, or what dishes the cafeteria might choose to serve for dinner on any given evening.

As a result, students had taken to spending inordinate amounts of energy attempting to steal advance copies of the menu from the head cook's desk in Administration Hall. James had joined Jazmine, Gobbins, and Wentworth on one such escapade and had succeeded in nicking a full menu plan for the entire month of December, right down to dessert options. Unfortunately, they had neglected to realize how far ahead the cook planned. It wasn't until after they had made their remarkably detailed class-time predictions that Wentworth had noticed that the menu plan was for December of the *following* year.

"Easy enough," Gobbins had proclaimed, flush with inspiration. "We just tell Thackery that our predictions are super advanced and won't come true until next year at this time!"

Against all probability, the plan had actually worked. Thackery had placed the students' predictions into a wall safe that he'd had installed for just such a purpose, explaining that he would grade the assignments in precisely one year, when the predictions could be measured.

For now, however, James still had twenty minutes of examination time left. Feeling sleepy and vaguely hungry for lunch, he set the crystal ball aside and reached for the handful of octocards. It was very still in the Precog classroom, which was high and dusty, lit by a bank of tall windows that ranged along the left side of the room. The windows were nearly opaque with curls of frost, reducing them to bright blindness. The only noises in the room were the busy scritch of quills on parchment and the occasional frustrated sigh and clunk as students shuffled their divining objects about on their desks.

James glanced around. Two desks to his right, Zane leaned over his parchment, writing furiously. The feather end of his quill shook wildly over his shoulder, as if he was systematically choking it by the nib. James sighed quietly and turned over the first octocard on his desk. He looked down at it.

the LADY of MYSTERY

James blinked at the card. For a moment, the face of the dancing, smiling woman on the card had looked familiar. It had looked, in fact, like Petra Morganstern. James frowned and leaned over the card. It no longer looked like Petra, and yet it still looked familiar. Now, it looked like the strange woman that he had seen in the midnight halls of the Aquapolis and later aboard the *Zephyr* shooting hexes out of the windows without any visible wand. Who was she?

James' hair suddenly prickled. *It was her*, he thought. *She was the other woman that came out of the Hall of Archives right after it was attacked! How could I have forgotten? But who is she?* He peered down at the card, concentrating furiously. The woman on the card didn't move, and yet she almost seemed to be smirking up at him. For the first time, James felt a deep sense of dismay about what he had seen that night. Was it possible that this woman and Petra had really done it? Was the woman somehow controlling Petra? Where had she come from, and what was the source of her power? Was it the same as the mysterious power that Petra herself seemed to demonstrate? In the warmth of the classroom, James shuddered.

Slowly, he turned over another card.

the MAN of MIXED DESTINIES

James' eyes widened as he stared down at this card. He'd never seen it before—would have sworn, in fact, that there was no such card in a deck of octocards. Worse, however, he thought he recognized the face on this card as well: it was his own. The figure on the card was skinny, dressed in a quaint black suit with tails and an orange tie. Rather unsettlingly, however, the head had two faces,

one looking right and smiling, the other looking left and frowning uncertainly. As James watched, the faces seemed to change places, to shift without moving. It made his eyes water and he blinked. With a shiver, he turned over another card, covering the first two.

the STAR of CONVERGENCE

James had seen this one before, of course—the four-point golden star. He had drawn it once last year, in Professor Trelawney's class. Back then, it hadn't seemed particularly meaningful. Now the sight of it atop the other two cards made his stomach drop slowly, as if he were standing on a high ledge, swaying perilously. The points of the star were like paths, merging together, forming something new and unknowable. He had a strange premonition that he was one of the four points. The strange lady, with her enigmatic smile and sourceless magic, was another. But who were the other two?

Petra, he thought. Of course, she's one of them.

But that didn't feel exactly right. James leaned low over the star, squinting at it, concentrating. The star almost seemed to pulse, and a dull ringing came with it, blocking out the other faint noises in the room.

Petra isn't one of the other two points, he now realized, and the sinking sensation in his stomach grew worse, chilling him. *Petra isn't one of them. She's both of them. Petra... and Morgan.*

He frowned to himself. That didn't make any sense at all, did it? Petra and Morgan were the same person, like two parts of the same mind, like the Jekyll and Hyde character in Mr. Walker's book. The Morgan side was the part that was influenced by the cursed shred of soul that once belonged to Lord Voldemort. The other part was the Petra that they had always known: smart, honest, inquisitive, and quirky. The good Petra had subdued the Morgan part of her personality—once in the Chamber of Secrets, and again at Morganstern Farm, when she had almost (but not quite) sacrificed her own sister to the lake.

But what about Petra's mysterious dreams? What did it mean that Petra had been plagued by visions of her sister dying in that very lake? Was the Morgan side of Petra's mind growing more powerful? Was the balance of power tipping? *I watch and I wait*, the voice of Morgan had said, echoing from the dark tower in Petra's new dream of the strange, ocean-locked plateau. *My time is very near. I am the Sorceress Queen. I am the Princess of Chaos...*

James looked at the last octocard again, the Star; four points merging toward the center, like paths meeting, forging a new destiny. *The four of us are converging somehow*, he thought, and even though it seemed vaguely mad, he knew that it was true. *Petra and Morgan, the mysterious lady, and me—all leading to something. But is it something good or bad? Is it something that should be stopped? Is it a destiny? Or a choice?*

James didn't know the answer to the first part of that question, but the second part was all too clear. Destiny, as Professor Jackson had once said, is merely the name we give to the sum total of

all of our life's choices. Was James making the right choices? Were the octocards offering him confirmation of his recent decisions... or a warning?

"James," a voice said, startling him. He glanced up and saw Professor Thackery standing in front of him, his hand out. "The examination period is over, James. Your test, please."

James was shocked. How had the last twenty minutes gone by so quickly? He looked around and saw that the rest of the classroom was empty. Everyone else had finished and headed off to lunch.

"Uh, sure, Professor," James stammered, glancing guiltily down at his parchment. To his continued surprise, he saw that the last page was covered with his own handwriting. He had no recollection of writing anything at all. With no chance to read his own prediction, he handed the parchment to the professor.

"Very good," Thackery said, peering through his glasses at the parchment. "Very, er, thorough."

James nodded uncertainly. "Thanks, Professor."

Feeling shaky and a little spooked, he virtually fled the classroom, following his friends to lunch.



16. CHRISTMAS IN PHILADELPHIA

On the Friday before Christmas, James, Ralph, Albus, and Lucy made their way to the Warping Willow, duffle bags slung over their shoulders and breaths of mist puffing into the frigid air. The first snow of the season had fallen that morning, covering the campus with a blanket of sparkling white and effectively hiding all of the flagstone paths, so that the four left winding, crisscrossing trails of footprints across the mall.

Once they congregated under the Tree, Lucy spoke the incantation that James had first heard from the undead Professor Straidthwait's account of the night Ignatius Magnussen had escaped.

"*Abitus*," she said, tapping the snow-crusted trunk with her wand. She turned to James as the Tree began to move subtly all around them. "Professor Remora taught me that."

James nodded, not explaining that he'd heard it himself from a different professor. Lucy sidled next to him, shoulder to shoulder, and her gloved hand laced fingers with his. James' face reddened a little and he looked away, watching as the campus became hidden behind the shifting whip-like branches of the Warping Willow.

The transition to the outside was swifter than that which occurred whenever Professor Baruti took his Potion-Making class to visit Madam Ayasha in the old Indian city of Shackamaxon. Within a few seconds, a push of wintry air shivered the Tree's branches and James saw the tiny walled courtyard beyond. Snow still frosted the ground, turning the trash-strewn yard into something nearly as magical as the university they had just left.

"Merry Christmas, friends," a deep grating voice said as the four stepped into the dull daylight. Flintlock stood near the gate, his rocky face sculpted into a crooked smile. His diamond eyes sparkled happily.

"Hey, Flintlock!" Albus cried, stepping to pat the rock troll on his huge rough elbow, which was as high as the boy could reach. "Aren't you cold? It feels like about fifty below out here!"

"Cold?" the troll repeated slowly. "I suppose the temperature has dropped a tiny bit, hasn't it? I'd barely noticed."

"Barely noticed!" Albus scoffed. "Last time we saw you, it was the end of summer. I could have fried a flobberworm on your forehead at noon."

The troll shrugged, making a sound like boulders rolling on gravel. "I have found that you humans are far more affected by tiny shifts in the weather than am I. You may not be aware that I was born in the crucible of the earth's furnace, where lakes of lava wash on beaches of pumice. I remember it only vaguely, but fondly. When the temperature reaches five thousand degrees, *then* I will comment on the weather, as do you."

Albus shook his head. "You won't be commenting on it to *me*, that's for sure."

The troll nodded and chuckled. With one languid movement, he reached for the gate. It squeaked noisily as he wrenched it open. A long brown car was waiting next to the curb beyond, a plume of exhaust dancing behind it. The passenger's window powered partly down and James spied his Uncle Percy in the driver's seat.

"Come on, you lot," he called. "Boot's open. Throw your bags back there and pile in. Hello Lucy dear! Happy Christmas, all of you!"

"Happy Christmas, Dad," Lucy called, finally unlacing her fingers from James' hand as she angled toward the boot of the car. James breathed a sigh of entirely mixed emotions.

It was very warm in the car as Uncle Percy navigated the narrow, slushy streets, muttering to himself in irritation at the slowness of the Muggle traffic and occasionally tapping the horn, making fussy little *bleeps*. James took off his stocking cap and stared out the windows, watching the city go by.

The drive took rather longer than James had expected, and James recognized vaguely that they were passing through the historical section of the city. He wished that Zane had come along with them for Christmas, if only so he could tell them about the buildings they were passing, his infectious enthusiasm brightening what was, otherwise, a fairly boring trek. As it was, the blonde boy had left school the day before, taking the train back to his parents' house in Kirkwood, Missouri. Before Zane had departed, however, James had finally decided to share with both he and Ralph some of the things that he had thus far kept a secret.

He'd begun by telling them about the strange prediction that had occurred during his Precognitive Engineering midterm, when he had envisioned the strange, impending convergence between the mysterious lady, himself, and the twin entities of Petra and Morgan, somehow separate even though they were both merely parts of the same person.

Then, because the two seemed vaguely connected, he'd described his last encounter with Professor Trelawney in the dawn corridors of Hogwarts, the day when they had begun their journey.

Zane and Ralph had listened with wide eyes, obviously understanding the significance of such a haunting prophecy coming from the lips of the otherwise comical old professor.

Finally, James had reminded them of what had happened on the stern of the *Gwyndemere*, when he had miraculously conjured the shining silver thread that had saved Petra's life. He explained that the thread was still there, still somehow connecting him to her, and that that was how he knew she could be trusted.

"I can see her dreams and feel her thoughts, sometimes," he'd said, although he hadn't told them about the written dream, the one that had conjured the frightening vision of the nightmare island and the black castle, before vanishing entirely. He had vowed to Petra not to tell anyone about the dream story and he meant to keep that promise. "I know that she's telling the truth about not being involved with the attack on the Vault of Destinies, no matter what we saw on that night. It couldn't have been her because when she says she wasn't there, I can sense that she's telling the truth. I don't think she could lie to me even if she wanted to."

James didn't really know if this was true or not, but he *did* know that she sincerely believed that she was innocent. This was what he had most wanted to impress upon Zane and Ralph, since their belief in that fact was going to be essential to the success of their attempts to clear her name.

"We'll work it all out after Christmas break," Zane had said eagerly. "You spend some time working on your cousin Lucy. After all, Rose is right: if we don't know what the dimensional key is, we won't recognize it when we follow Magnussen into the past. Lucy's all googly-eyed for you, so it should be no problem to convince her to let us scour Erebus Castle for clues."

James' cheeks had heated a bit at that. "She's not googly-eyed for me. She's my cousin, if you remember."

"Have you taken a good look at her lately?" Zane had asked, cocking his head and pointing at his face. "Not much of a family resemblance. I'd guess the only blood you share is the blood pudding you all put away last Weasley family picnic."

"Shut up," James had protested. "You're daft."

Ralph had shrugged with one shoulder. "I think he's right, James. Even Rose and Scorpius say so. Rose says Lucy's been sweet on you ever since last year."

James hadn't been able to argue it any further. He knew that it was true, as uncomfortable as it made him. He was, however, a little rankled about the fact that he'd been, apparently, the last person to find out about it. He couldn't quite bring himself to manipulate Lucy's feelings for him (whatever they were) to get a tour of Erebus Castle, but maybe if he just asked nicely, that would be enough. After all, she was his cousin. They'd always gotten on very well, which was more than he could say for some of his other cousins, particularly Louis. Why would Lucy say no?

Silently, James cursed himself for having asked Lucy to go to the Halloween Ball with him. Why hadn't Zane and Ralph warned him since they had all apparently known how Lucy felt about him?

"We're almost there," Lucy said from the front seat of the car, turning to smile back at James. "We'll all be staying over at your parents' flat for Christmas Eve. Won't that be fun?"

James nodded and forced a smile. "Sure, Lu."

Next to him, Albus began making obnoxious kissing noises. James shoved him hard enough to knock his hat off.

Uncle Percy parked the car in an underground parking structure and led the troop to the silvery doors of a large elevator.

"Muggle condominiums," he said disdainfully, pressing the up button. "Refitted for magical occupancy, thankfully, at least on the thirteenth floor."

The doors swooped open and the group clambered inside. There was no thirteen on the bank of lit buttons, but Percy didn't seem to mind. Producing his wand, he tapped the buttons for floor number one and floor number three. Immediately, the doors shuttled closed again, and the elevator lurched, rocketing upwards much faster than any elevator James had ever ridden before. His feet left the floor for a split second as the lift shuddered to a sudden stop.

"Here we are," Percy said briskly, watching as the doors socked open once more. James had expected a hallway, but the lift apparently opened directly onto his parents' flat. It was quite large and open, with high ceilings, heavy decorative woodwork, and a rather baroque chandelier hanging over the entryway. From the perspective of the open elevator, the living spaces all seemed to run together, forming an airy blend of kitchen, dining room, and parlor. James' sister Lily was seated at the dining room table across from Izzy, a collection of half-decorated sugar cookies and coloured icings spread between them.

"They're here!" Lily called, looking up and grinning.

Behind James, Percy sighed. "Being Head Auror," he muttered, stepping into the high foyer, "certainly has its perks."



Shortly after their arrival, Uncle Percy left again, meaning to pick up Molly at the nearby magical elementary school and then collect Audrey at their flat. Ralph joined Lily and Izzy in icing duties, using his wand to recolour the icings with stripes, sparkles, and the occasional flashing Rudolph red. Izzy laughed out loud, which was not the sort of thing girls often did around Ralph.

He appeared quite pleased with himself and James was glad. Lucy and Albus went upstairs to explore the bedrooms and stake out the best beds for themselves while James climbed onto a stool near the kitchen and pulled a plate of tiny mincemeat pies toward himself.

"Your father's still at work," Ginny, James' mum, said with a hint of worry in her voice. She was in the kitchen, cooking madly, as she was wont to do whenever she was fretting. Back at Marble Arch, Albus had had a pet name for their mum whenever she got like this. "Look out," he'd say, usually slamming the bedroom door behind him, "Hurricane Ginny's on the rampage. Tie everything down before she blows in here and gives it a good cleaning."

"That's an awful lot of puddings," James commented, peering over the countertop. "Expecting the Harriers for dinner, are we?"

Ginny sighed and dusted her hands on her apron. She took a moment to look around at the crowded countertops. "You know," she replied, "whenever Christmas comes around, I seem to forget that I'm not still a kid living at the Burrow, with Mum and me downstairs baking everything under the sun and my brothers eating it all up nearly as fast as we pull it out of the oven. Some habits are hard to break."

James wished that they were having Christmas at the Burrow like they normally did. He asked, "Will we see Grandma and Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione and everybody?"

"We'll probably talk to them by Floo," Ginny answered, using her wand to stop a huge wooden spoon from stirring a bowl of dough. "But not until tomorrow after breakfast. It's always so difficult to remember the time change and all. We're lucky we're connected to the international Floo Network at all. If it wasn't necessary for your father's work..." Her voice trailed away, distracted. She pulled the refrigerator door open so quickly that the milk bottles rattled, and then stood staring into it, as if she'd forgotten what she was looking for.

"Where is Dad anyway?" James asked, frowning. "And Petra too?"

Ginny let the refrigerator door swing closed again and looked at James, her face tense. "He's working," she said, and then drew a brisk sigh. "I haven't told your brother or sister this, James, so if you breathe a word about it to them, I swear I'll blend cockroaches into your eggnog. If I don't tell *someone*, though, I think I'll burst. The fact is: your father's on a raid."

"Ah," James said, nodding. "And you're worried about him."

"Nonsense," she lied convincingly. "Your father can take care of himself. With any luck, he'll be home within the hour. It's a big night for him. If all goes well..."

"Who's he raiding?" James asked in a low, eager voice. "Did he track down those W.U.L.F. nutters?"

"Shh!" Ginny rasped sharply, and then visibly calmed herself. "Sorry. Yes." She came over to meet James at the little breakfast bar. "I'm so nervous lately. Those Magical Integration Bureau men were bad enough, lurking in their black cars on the corner, watching our windows, following your father around when he so much as goes to the store for milk and bread. Now, there're people from

the American legal administration as well, hovering about like bats in their black cloaks and hats. They're worse, since you never know where they are. If tonight goes well for your father, though..."

"What'd he find?" James prodded, eyes wide. "Did he track down the people who attacked us on the train?"

Ginny shook her head, more in wonderment than negation. "It's huge," she whispered, "this Wizard's United Liberation movement. It wasn't just the attack on the *Zephyr*. They were the ones who hired those pirates to waylay us during our voyage. They've been dead set against us being here at all, and for good reason. Titus Hardcastle and your father have been tracking them for months, even calling in some favors with Draco Malfoy at Gringotts. I'm amazed that Draco helped at all, considering how much trouble he could get into if his goblin bosses found out. There's financial support going into the W.U.L.F. from all over the world, but the base is right here in the United States. Titus and your father followed the money and finally found the organization's underground headquarters. A group of American wizarding police are helping your father right now. With any luck, they've already descended on the place and rounded up the ringleaders."

"Wow," James breathed, impressed. "I wish I could see it!"

Ginny shuddered. "Ugh, not me. I can barely stand to think of it. All of those awful people, and your father right in the middle of them."

"Dad can take care of himself," James grinned, mimicking his mother's words. "Remember? Nobody out-Aurors him. Those W.U.L.F. gits will be spending Christmas in Azkaban."

Ginny nodded. "I'm sure you're right. But I doubt they'd send them back home for that. They'll do their time here in the States. I can only hope that they find that poor Muggle senator and rescue him. Who knows what they've filled his head with by now, assuming he's, er..."

"Still alive?" James suggested.

"Don't talk that way," his mum shuddered again. "Go and say hello to Petra, why don't you? She's up in her room. First door on the right."

James nodded and dropped lightly from his stool. Tramping up the stairs, he heard Albus and Lucy talking nearby, their voices echoing into the hall. The second door on the right was cracked open, but the room beyond was dark. James knocked lightly on the door.

"Hey Petra," he called softly, not wishing to wake her if she was napping. "Happy Christmas. Come downstairs and help me eat some of these desserts, eh?"

The door creaked open a little at James' knock. He peered inside with one eye. In the dimness, he could see two narrow beds and a dresser. One of the beds was rumpled, the pillows humped together haphazardly.

"Petra?" James called again, pushing the door further open. The room was empty, although the bed certainly appeared to have been recently occupied. He frowned into the room, and then turned and retreated back into the hall. He followed Albus and Lucy's voices until he found them in a bedroom near the end, kneeling on the floor next to a pile of wrapped presents.

"Oh," Albus said, glancing up at James and lowering his brow. "It's just you. We thought Mum was onto us."

James frowned, watching as his brother trained his wand on one of the larger presents. "What are you doing?"

"What's it look like," Albus replied. "Getting a peeksie. Hang back if you don't want to know whether you're getting a new skrim or a box of underpants."

James shook his head. "Have either of you seen Petra yet?"

Lucy glanced up. "No," she said, tilting her head. "Why?"

"Just wondering. I thought I'd say hello. That's all."

Lucy shrugged and shook her head, her eyes still on James.

"All right," he replied. "Whatever. Carry on, then."

"Don't tell Mum," Albus warned as James turned away. "I'll hex you good if you do."

On the way down the hall, James peered into Petra and Izzy's bedroom again. It was still dark and empty, although the rumpled bed gave the strangest impression that someone had been lying on it only moments before. James shook his head again and tromped back down the stairs.



Dinner came and went and James' dad still had not arrived home.

The rest of the adults tried to maintain a festive atmosphere, but James sensed that there was a lot of tension in the air. Audrey and Percy sat near the fireplace and roasted chestnuts while Ginny and Denniston Dolohov cleaned up the kitchen, talking idly in low voices. Petra had not shown up for dinner at all, which James thought was a little odd.

"She's begun keeping rather strange hours ever since the debacle with that Mr. Henredon," Ginny had admitted to James. "I think she's worried and afraid, poor thing. I can't blame her. A new country, and all of a sudden, she's in legal trouble, all over a case of mistaken identity. I mean, I feel bad for the poor man who was attacked, but to accuse a teenaged girl of such a thing..."

"But," James said, furrowing his brow, "she wasn't upstairs when I went up to say hi to her. Her room was empty."

Ginny shrugged. "She was probably in the loo, silly."

James frowned. He was almost certain that the bathroom had been empty as well when he'd passed it, but he didn't press the issue. Shortly thereafter, Petra had, in fact, come down the stairs, smiling sleepily and greeting everyone.

"Hi James," she said, coming to join him on the couch. "Sorry. I was napping. I've been doing that a lot lately. I think it's for lack of anything better to do."

James blinked at her, perplexed. "You..." he began, but stopped himself. He shook his head slightly. "Never mind. How have you been?"

"All right," she replied, looking toward the fire. "Reading, mostly. Professor Baruti comes by in the evenings sometimes and helps me with my French. He's very kind and understanding about all of this."

James thought for a moment. Finally, in a quiet voice, he said, "I think we've come up with a way to clear your name, Petra."

She turned back to him, frowning slightly. "How?"

James wobbled his head back and forth, unsure how much to say. "It's complicated. But Zane and Ralph are helping. I think we might be onto something. If it works out, we'll find the people who really did attack the Vault of Destinies and steal the crimson thread. Then you'll be in the clear."

To James' surprise, Petra was looking at him doubtfully. "Are you sure that's a good idea, James? I mean, it sounds..." she paused, as if choosing her words very carefully, "... er, dangerous."

"Maybe," James admitted. "But it's worth it, isn't it? I mean, Petra, you're in really serious trouble here. If that arbiter, Keynes, says you're guilty of attacking the Vault and freezing Mr. Henredon, you could go to prison for a long, long time. If there's something I can do to stop that from happening—"

Petra smiled at James as if he was rather silly. "I won't go to prison, James. Izzy and I will be fine. We've been through worse scrapes."

"You have?" James frowned incredulously. "Petra, that Keynes idiot was serious. Mum says there are more of his kind floating around the streets outside, keeping an eye on the flat, making sure you don't make a break for it or something. You can't just blow this off. Izzy needs you. And so do... er, other people. If you get sent to wizarding prison..."

Petra sighed deeply. "I'm not blowing it off, James. I just... I can't worry about that. Not now. There are other things. More important things."

"Petra," James exclaimed, exasperated. "What's more important than being accused of attempted murder and the theft of some crazy dimensional artifact?"

In answer, Petra looked at James and smiled a little crookedly. "You tell me, James. We're still connected, aren't we? That silver cord you conjured, it's still there, even now. Don't you feel it?"

James glanced down at his right hand. He opened it, palm up on his lap. He *could* feel the cord, now that she had mentioned it. He could even (although it might have been his imagination) see it very faintly.

"No," he lied. "I think it's faded away now. I can't see your dreams anymore."

Petra held up her own hand. James looked at it in the light of the fireplace. "You can't lie to me, James, even if you want to," Petra said, her voice low, amused. Slowly, she lowered her own hand onto his. When they touched, James felt a small burst of mingled heat and cold. It spread up his arm, making him shiver, and yet he didn't pull his hand away. Underneath the thrumming energy of the magical cord, he could feel the prosaic thrill of Petra's hand resting upon his, her fingers cool and slender, curling around the heel of his palm. He looked up at her, speechless.

"The cord is still there," she said very quietly. "It connects us, probably forever, because you were willing to die for me. I know that now, James. But instead of making a trade—your life for mine, like the laws of deep magic demand—you tapped into something even deeper. Something beyond normal magic. Do you know what that is?"

James hadn't really considered it, not since that night on the stern of the *Gwyndemere*, but now, looking into Petra's eyes, he thought he did know the answer after all. He nodded.

"It came from *you*, somehow," he said, not a little awe in his voice. "I tapped into your power, the same power you used to reconnect the anchor chain to the ship without even using your wand. The power you almost used on Keynes when he was trying to separate you and Izzy that day in Administration Hall."

Petra nodded, her face solemn. "You tapped into my power, yes. I don't know how. Maybe because of how you feel for me and because of what we've been through together, and maybe even just because of the intensity of the moment. You were willing to trade your life for mine, but the magic was bigger than that. The magic saved *both* of us. But, James, things like that don't happen without a price. I fear that someday...", she shook her head and looked away again, toward the flickering flames of the fireplace, "someday you might regret it."

James was shocked. "No way!" he whispered harshly, noticing the look his Aunt Audrey was giving them from across the room. He lowered his voice again and went on. "Petra, that's crazy. I'd do it again right now. And I'll do whatever I can to find the people who really did curse Mr. Henredon so you can be free again. But Petra—" He stopped and knitted his brow. Barely whispering, he went on, "How can all of this be? What makes you so... *powerful* all of a sudden?"

Petra drew a long, deep breath, thinking. Finally, she met his eyes again. "I've always had that power," she admitted. "I didn't understand it, and neither did anyone else, especially my grandparents. They were afraid of me because my magic was so much greater than theirs. They didn't believe I would know how to use it, that I would grow up to be something terrible and cruel. But their fear shamed me. As a result, I trained myself not to use my powers. I taught myself to use a wand instead of just my hands. The wand was like a funnel, making the magic smaller, weaker, more like everyone else's. Eventually, by the time you first met me, I'd become so used to the wand that I'd forgotten what it was like to work magic without it."

James' brow was still furrowed as he listened to her, but she was looking past him now, her eyes unfocused, her hand still on his.

"Now, though, both of my grandparents are dead," she said faintly. "There's no reason to hide anymore. I broke my wand on my last night at Papa Warren's farm. I didn't do it on purpose. I just let it feel the full weight of my powers. It broke right down the middle, split as if it had been struck by lightning, just like my very first wand, when I was a little girl and hadn't yet learned how to rein it in. Now I don't need a wand. Now I'm learning to use the power the way I was meant to. That's what you tapped into, James," she said, focusing on him again. "For better or worse, you locked us together. When you conjured this silver cord, you bound us, maybe forever. Soul to soul. And that, James, you may well someday regret. Someday, you may curse yourself for it, and me too."

James' thoughts swam as he looked at the slight girl next to him. It all sounded perfectly daft to him, and yet he could sense the honesty of her words. She believed everything she said. If she hadn't been touching him, her hand on his, making the silver cord pulse like a dynamo, he might have been able to doubt her. Now, however, tiny shreds of memories came into his head, directly from Petra's own thoughts.

He saw her as a young girl, closing a set of window drapes with a wave of her small hand. Another memory showed her in a sunlit wood, moving rocks through the air with a pointing finger, forming them into carefully constructed, mysteriously sad towers. Finally, he saw her as a ten-year-old girl standing frightened in the darkness of a cellar, several rats lying dead at her feet. She had thought the rats to death, merely sending her mind into their little beating hearts and squeezing them, bursting the little organs like balloons. She had hated the rats and feared them, but lying there dead at her feet, their feet curled and their black eyes staring like drops of oil, Petra felt terrible about what she had done. She tried to think them back to life, but that was where her powers—her prodigious, mysterious powers—ended. She could kill, but she could not return to life. Young Petra cried in the darkness of the cellar, cried for the rats that she had first feared, and then, when it was too late, pitied. She cried for her own lost innocence. She was, after all, a rat murderer.

And then, buried beneath all of these secret visions, curling under and through them like a snake, was a memory of a woman's voice, crying out with terror and a sort of mad, vindictive spite. *I always knew you'd be the death of me, you horrible girl*, the voice screeched. *And I was right! I was riiigght!*

James shook himself. Involuntarily, he pulled his hand away from Petra's. The visions, and the mad, screeching voice, stopped at once. Petra blinked at him, and then, sheepishly, she pulled her own hand back.

"Petra," James whispered. "How is this possible? What... what kind of witch are you?"

Petra sighed once more and shook her head. "I'm not a witch, James."

In the warmth of the room, James felt suddenly cold. He remembered the vision of the black castle and the strange, dead island. Like the visions he had seen when Petra had touched him only moments before, that had also been a peek into Petra's dreams and thoughts. And in *that* vision, the

Morgan part of Petra's mind, somehow separate and imprisoned, had spoken aloud: *I am the Princess of Chaos*, she had said. *I am the Sorceress Queen.*

The *Sorceress Queen*.

James opened his mouth, not sure what he was about to say, when Lily, Molly, and Izzy suddenly ran past, their feet thumping wildly, their voices giggling like a flock of birds.

"Tag!" Izzy said, tapping James on the shoulder. "You're it!"

With a flurry of screams and laughter, the three girls scurried away. James watched them, and then turned back to Petra.

"You're it," she smiled, shrugging one shoulder. "You'd better go get them."

"Petra," James began, but she shook her head.

"No more for now, James," she said, and James could sense that she meant it. "Besides, I think they just ran into your father's study. You'd best herd them back out before they disturb any of his things."

James could barely bring himself to interrupt his hushed conversation with Petra, especially when he felt so close to such an important revelation, but he didn't seem to have any choice. Petra had already turned away, standing and moving toward the fire. With a great sigh, James stood as well.

"All right, you lot," he began as he entered the study door. "You know you're not supposed to be in here. Especially you, Lil—"

He was drowned out by a cacophony of giggles and shrieks as all three of the girls scrambled from behind chairs and under tables. They rushed past him, obviously hoping that he meant to chase them. James shook his head in weary annoyance, marveling at how his sister seemed to play down to the level of the youngest child in her presence, and then looked around the study to ensure that nothing had been disturbed.

The room was rather like a small library, crowded with chairs, end tables, and lamps. The far end was dominated by a large desk and a leather swivel chair with a very high back. The chair was about as un-Harry-Potter as anything James had ever seen. Its high, pointed shoulders were adorned with silver rivets, making it look, on the whole, like something that belonged in the basement of Erebus Mansion. Obviously, the flat had come already furnished. James knew that his father would never pick out such a thing for himself.

Moving toward the desk, James reached over it and gave the chair a tentative push. It turned silently, revolving somewhat malevolently on its oiled base. Behind the chair, propped on a low shelf below the window, was the small Shard of the *Amsera Certh* that Merlin had given his dad. Its face was silvery with rushing smoke, unfocused. James knew that it connected, when magically empowered, to the Auror offices back at the Ministry of Magic. Using the Shard, his father kept in close contact with Titus Hardcastle and the other Aurors.

Below the Shard, in the shadow of the shelf, was a gleaming iron lockbox. James' eyes widened. This, he knew, was the lockbox that his father had taken to keeping his Invisibility Cloak and Marauder's Map in ever since last year, when they had been stolen out of his trunk by Scorpius Malfoy. James moved quickly around the desk, his curiosity getting the better of him. Stopping the huge leather chair from turning, he sat down on it, facing the window. He tapped the lockbox with his wand.

"*Alohomora*," he whispered quickly.

There was a flash of golden light, and for a moment, James thought that his basic Unlocking Spell had worked. The flash didn't diminish, however. It spun around the lockbox, as if repelled from the iron shape. Finally, with a crackle of magical energy, the bolt spat back at James, striking him in the chest and shoving both him and the chair backwards. The chair rammed against the desk, producing a rattling thud.

James shook himself, alarmed, and quickly rammed his wand back into his pocket, scrambling to get up. He should have known that his father's counter-spells would repel anything that he, James, might use to open the lockbox.

There were footsteps just outside the study. A shadow moved on the partially open door. Without thinking, James dropped back onto the huge desk chair. The chair began to spin again and he clumped his feet to the floor, halting its movement. He stared furiously out the darkened window in front of him and held his breath.

The door swept open behind him, and James realized, with some bemusement, that he could see the entire room reflected in the high study window. The shape of the batwing chair blocked out a lot of the reflection, of course, but he could see the top of the door and indistinct shadows on the nearby bookshelves as someone entered the room, leaving the door wide open behind them.

"What would Dumbledore say?" the figure mumbled quietly, and James realized, with a mixture of relief and trepidation, that it was his father. Harry Potter had finally returned from his raid. He sighed quietly to himself, "Think, Potter. What would Dumbledore say? Or even Snape?" And then, in a louder voice, "In here, gentlemen. Close the door behind you, if you would."

Slowly, James hunkered lower in the black chair, keeping his feet planted firmly on the floor to prevent it from swiveling around and revealing him. More footsteps approached and in the window's reflection, James saw two more men enter the room. They wore the black suits and ties of the Magical Integration Bureau.

"I thought it best," Harry said, moving toward his desk and leaning on it, facing the men, "that we debrief immediately. Thank you for coming inside."

"We wouldn't have it any other way," one of the men said stiffly. The image in the window's reflection was somewhat distorted, but James recognized the man. He was the one they had first met outside the *Zephyr* after the crashing attack along the streets of Muggle New York. His name, James recalled, was Price.

"Well then," Harry began briskly, "it seems that our information was accurate enough. That is one good thing we can take from this evening's exercise. The W.U.L.F. is on the run. We can expect that they will be much clumsier now, having been routed from their headquarters."

"And this seems like a good thing to you?" Price said evenly. "I don't know about you, but I'd rather stamp out the whole nest of spiders at once than try to chase them one by one into the shadows. Wouldn't you, Espinosa?"

"I sure wouldn't call tonight a win for the good guys," Espinosa replied coolly. "They know we're onto them now. They'll be watching for us. No more element of surprise."

"We have eyes all over the city," Harry said. "Now that Tarrantus' agents are on the run, we will surely sense their movements. If we have to track them down one by one, then that's how we will do it. It wouldn't be the first time the Department of Aurors disassembled a network of dark wizards one brick at a time."

Espinosa commented, "Would've been a lot easier if we'd have been able to take Tarrantus alive."

"Sure would," Price nodded, and James could see that he was watching Harry closely. "I don't suppose you magical types have the ability to extract information from the dead, do you? No? That's a shame. And here we 'Muggles' all thought you were so much more advanced than that."

"Necromancy is a forbidden art," Harry replied. "Not that it was ever particularly accurate, even for those who excelled at it."

"Pretty convenient," Price countered. "Tarrantus being found murdered in his recently abandoned headquarters and us not being able to interview the deceased to find out where his people might have escaped to or what their plans were."

"No sign of the missing senator, either," Espinosa added reasonably. "Very convenient."

"Convenient for *whom*, exactly?" Harry said, and James heard the barely restrained anger in his voice. "Since I've been spearheading the international search for these villains, I can say that the lack of any prominent leads and the apparent murder of their leader is decidedly *inconvenient*. I had very high hopes that this whole mess would be concluded tonight, as you well know."

"So you keep saying," Price countered. "And yet there is no question that *somebody* alerted the W.U.L.F. to our raid only minutes before our arrival, giving them just enough time to escape. Not to mention the very damning fact that your name, Mr. Potter, was scrawled on the wall with the victim's own blood."

"A warning," Harry said stonily. "They want me gone, precisely because we are this close to capturing them. They've been attempting to thwart our attempts ever since they hired a fleet of pirates to sink us on the journey here. Tarrantus himself led the attack on the train and personally delivered the warning, telling us to leave immediately or face the consequences."

"And now, Tarrantus is lying cold in a wizarding morgue in downtown New Amsterdam," Espinosa nodded. "I mean, it *could* be that the name written in blood on the wall was a warning

that you should give up and run home, Mr. Potter. But we cannot rule out that it might, in fact, have been the victim's way of identifying his killer."

"That's ridiculous, Mr. Espinosa, if you'll pardon me for being blunt," Harry said coldly, "even apart from the fact that I was *with you* at the time the man was killed. I've seen Killing Curses in action in my time. The curse that ended Tarrantus' life was not only brutal, it was instantaneous. He wasn't just killed. He was destroyed. I promise you, there were no final moments during which the man could have scrawled the name of his murderer on the wall in his own blood. Tarrantus was dead before he hit the floor and someone else wrote my name on the wall with his blood."

Espinosa asked, "And why would the W.U.L.F. have murdered their own leader only moments before their escape from our raid?"

"Perhaps for being sloppy," Harry suggested curtly. "After all, it was his own paper trail that led us to him. Organizations like the W.U.L.F. do not easily forgive such ineptitude."

"Could be," Price agreed reluctantly. "Then again, it could be that Tarrantus was getting ready to talk. Maybe he was getting cold feet about the organization's tactics and was planning on telling us everything he knew. Maybe someone else decided he was a threat and planned to overthrow him as leader. They'd have no choice but to kill him, of course. Whoever tipped them off about the impending raid, seems likely to me that that's the same person who's probably in charge now. What do you think, Espinosa?"

"Just makes sense," Espinosa agreed. "Find the snitch, find the murderer. Find the murderer, find the new head of the W.U.L.F."

"And you think that person is me," Harry said with a sigh.

Price shook his head. "We're paid to be suspicious, Mr. Potter. Don't take offense. If we had any actual evidence of your involvement, then we wouldn't be standing here in your study having this little chat. But I'll be honest with you. There's loads of circumstantial evidence piling up against you. The bloody name on the wall doesn't help."

Harry's voice was no longer restrained. "That's insane," he proclaimed darkly.

"Lotta things are insane, Mr. Potter," Price agreed. "Wanting to maintain power over non-magical people by not sharing your world with them, that seems a little insane to some of us. Conjuring up shadowy villains like the W.U.L.F. to scare your own people into living by outdated laws of secrecy, that also seems pretty insane. Of course, all of this is just conjecture at this point, I admit. But if it ever *stops* being conjecture, well..."

"The W.U.L.F. is *not* a creation of the Department of Aurors," Harry said with cold emphasis. "Has it even begun to occur to you that it might have been one of *your* men who tipped them off about the impending raid? Frankly, if the Wizard's United Liberation Front believes what they claim, then your own people are much more sympathetic with them than is the Department of Aurors."

"Really, Mr. Potter," Price chided. "That's a little childish, isn't it? You perceive that we are accusing you, so you accuse us in response. I expected better from you."

"*Someone* alerted them that we were coming," Harry insisted. "On my side, the only people who knew about the raid were Titus Hardcastle and myself."

"And we have your word for that only," Price said, effecting an apologetic tone of voice. "Be reasonable, Mr. Potter. Do you mean to say that you didn't tell anyone else at the Ministry of Magic? Or even your wife and family?"

"I mean to tell you that those on my side who knew about today's raid," Harry growled, "are people who I trust completely. Members of our raiding party, including myself, might have gotten killed today had the W.U.L.F. chosen to ambush us instead of run. Why would my own people have risked that?"

"If your people and the W.U.L.F. are one and the same," Espinosa suggested, "then it wouldn't be a risk at all, would it?"

Harry drew a deep breath, composing himself. "Gentlemen, if this is where we stand, then I fail to see how we can continue to work together. Either arrest me for conspiracy or let me and my associates work alone."

"Now let's not get huffy, Harry," Price said, softening his tone and raising his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Espinosa and I are just doing our jobs. The task of the Magical Integration Bureau is to protect the interactions between the magical and the non-magical world and to see that the two coexist with as much harmony as possible. Your people have chosen to hide yourselves and live among us in secrecy, which has always struck the Bureau as suspicious on the very surface of it. You can't blame us for approaching our duties with a degree of healthy skepticism, can you? Look, if you're innocent, then you have nothing to fear from our involvement. If you're guilty, then of course we can't just allow you to operate without our supervision. Either way, Harry, you're stuck with us. Let's try to make that fact as pleasant as possible, eh?"

There was a long pause as Harry appeared to consider this. In the window reflection, James could see Price standing to the side, his face stony, waiting. Across from him, Espinosa looked vaguely bored. He stared up at the dark ceiling, eyebrows raised inscrutably.

"So be it," Harry finally said. "But if I suspect that your notions of mistrust are undermining our investigations, or worse, placing us all in danger, then be assured that I will abandon this mission, regardless of the consequences. Is that understood?"

"Duly noted," Price said with a smile. "I'm glad that we can all dispense with any pretenses. Everything all out in the open. That's the way I like it. Right, Espinosa?"

"Right you are, Price," the other man agreed soberly.

"I assume you can find the door on your own," Harry replied. "Merry Christmas, gentlemen, and goodnight."

James heard shuffling footsteps and saw the door's reflection as it opened again. A few moments later, the elevator doors dinged from down the hall. Price and Espinosa, apparently, were on their way back down to the parking garage.

Without turning the chair around, James asked quietly, "You know I'm here, don't you?"

Harry, still leaning against the front of the desk, chuckled drily. "I never leave my chair facing the window. I figured it was either you or Albus. Frankly, I was betting on the latter."

"Nice counter-spell on the lockbox," James said, swiveling the chair to face his father. "I wasn't trying to nick the cloak and map, you know. I was just... checking on them."

Harry nodded, looking back at his son over his shoulder. With a sigh, he turned around and plopped onto one of the visitor's chairs.

"So, what do you think, James?" he asked. "Is this whole investigation a lost cause?"

"Why would they think you were involved with the same bad guys that you're trying to catch?" James exclaimed incredulously. "I mean, it doesn't make any sense!"

"It makes sense from *their* viewpoint," Harry said sadly. "You were at Neville's assembly, so you heard how a lot of people around here think. Many of them truly believe that the Ministry of Magic would indeed stoop to creating shadow villains, from Voldemort to the W.U.L.F., just to keep the magical world under their thumb. If that was true, then it would make perfect sense that I'd be in on it, and might even be one of the masterminds of the scheme."

"That's what Ralph said, too," James acknowledged reluctantly. "But none of it's true! How can they believe such a bunch of drivel?"

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "Once you abandon the concept of truth, James, everything becomes merely a matter of *perspective*. For the Progressive Element, there is no right or wrong; there are only sides. When one of those sides defeats another, they don't see it as a triumph of good over evil or evil over good. They view it merely as one side exerting unfair power over the other. Without truth—without any belief in right and wrong—the best one can hope for in life is a sort of lukewarm concept of fairness, where both sides in any fight simply choose to live and let live. They think that what we call 'good' should just learn to tolerate what we call 'evil' since good and evil are really just equally valid philosophies of life."

"But," James began, screwing up his face in an effort to understand. "But, that's obviously crazy. This isn't like disagreeing over whether flying carpets should be legal or not. Voldemort was a bloodthirsty villain who killed people just for the sake of his own power. Stopping him was the only way to save countless other lives, wasn't it?"

"Not according to the Progressive Element," Harry replied, shaking his head. "They think that if only we'd stopped fighting him, laid down our weapons, and given him his right to live the way he wanted to, then we'd all have just lived in peace, somehow."

James considered this for a moment, his eyes narrowed, and then shrugged. "But then he'd just have killed every last one of you."

Harry nodded. "Probably. Voldemort wasn't a 'live and let live' sort of wizard, especially considering the prophecy. One of us had to die for the other to survive. But really, prophecy or not, that's how it is in every corner of the world, in every struggle between evil and good, between power and love. The two cannot compromise because they cancel each other out. There will always be a struggle between them until one prevails over the other. There is no alternative."

"So, all these Progressive Element types are complete nutters, then?" James said, throwing up his hands.

"Not all of them," Harry replied with a sigh. "They *are* right that a lot of awful things have been done throughout the ages in the name of good. Merlin himself tells of battles that occurred between the magical and non-magical peoples of his day, not over right and wrong, as they pretended to be, but over mere prejudice and fear, intolerance and hatred. These are the things we must always be wary of at all costs. And yet, to deny that some struggles are, indeed, worthy of the fight—that evil and good are always alive and in enmity against one another, like fire and water—is to turn a pragmatic truth into a dangerous delusion. This, James, is what the Progressive Element is guilty of. Most of them are not bad, and most of them are very well-meaning. But that does not mean that their philosophy is not, in the end, thoroughly deadly."

James thought on this for a long moment. Finally, he asked, "So who do you think ratted you all out?"

Harry shook his head again, his face growing dark. "I don't know. Hardly anyone knew about the raid. But I suspect that Espinosa and Price are right. Whoever warned them about us also killed their leader, Tarrantus, and left his body for us to find. The W.U.L.F. has a *new* leader now, someone who may well know a lot more about us and how we plan to stop them than Tarrantus ever did. I suspect that the first order of business is to find out who that person is. Then, perhaps we will know how to proceed."

"But who could it have been, Dad?" James asked earnestly, leaning forward over the desk. "I mean, Mum knew, and maybe Lil..."

"Even if they did tell someone else," Harry replied, narrowing his eyes, "nobody sent any messages out of the flat, either via Floo or even through the Shard. I've set up hexes to alert me anytime there is any communication between the flat and the outside world, just to make sure that no one is spying on us. If any message had gone out, I'd have known about it." Suddenly, Harry looked up at his son, his eyes sharp. "James, did any of you come or go over the last few hours? Besides Percy, I mean. After the time you arrived, did anyone go out? Even for a little stroll around the neighborhood?"

"No, Dad," James said, but then he paused. Unbidden, he found himself thinking of Petra's empty bed upstairs when he had gone to look for her. He'd searched through all of the upstairs rooms, but hadn't seen any sign of her. And yet, some time later, she had come downstairs, as if she'd been up in her bedroom all along. James was still shaking his head, but his thoughts spun onward, turning cold and fearful. Petra would have known about the raid. But *surely* she wouldn't have warned the villains even if she could have somehow Disapparated from the flat without anyone noticing. Would she?

"Well, I don't know, then," Harry said, leaning back in his chair again. "But I'll find out. Whoever it was that leaked the information about the raid and killed Tarrantus, I'll find them. And when I do, they'll be sorry they ever took over for him. I'll make very sure of that."

James nodded, but inside he felt numb and deeply frightened.

I am the Princess of Chaos, he thought, remembering the dream-vision of Morgan, the shadowy figure that had spoken with Petra's voice. *I... am the Sorceress Queen...*



Christmas at the flat seemed to go by in a rather hectic rush, juggled between the much shorter Alma Aleron holiday break, Harry and Percy's constant work demands, and James' spinning thoughts about Petra, the W.U.L.F., Professor Ignatius Magnussen, and the Magical Integration Bureau.

Christmas Day was the only somewhat relaxing day of the break, during which time the family opened their presents and visited with Grandma Weasley, Uncle Ron, Aunt Hermione, and the rest via Floo. From his mother, James did indeed get a box of new underpants as well as a new winter cloak. His father, however, had purchased James a brand new pair of Clutchcudgel gauntlets from a wizarding sporting goods store in New Amsterdam. The gloves were leather, coloured Bigfoot orange and blue, with a chamois-lined wand sleeve in the left wrist. Denniston Dolohov had gotten Ralph a new wizard chess set with enchanted pieces that could, if desired, play themselves. The pieces had been especially hexed by a famed wizard chess champion so that Ralph could practice the game alone whenever he couldn't find a suitable opponent. Petra, to James' surprise, had managed to procure Izzy a new dollhouse and china doll, which Izzy had immediately christened Victoria Penelope.

"But never Vicky Penny," she warned, peering sternly at James, to which James nodded solemnly in agreement.

Petra, of course, having no surviving parents or grandparents, received no gift whatsoever. Ginny had confided in James that the girl had insisted they not buy her anything either.

"She says it's more than enough that we're letting her live with us during the investigation," she said as they dried dishes near the kitchen sink. "I respected her wishes, but it seems so depressing not to have any gifts to open at Christmas. Especially since she lost that brooch of hers on the voyage. She downplays it, but I think that brooch had special significance to her. She says it was a gift from her father for her first Christmas. Did you know that?"

James had not, and admitted that he'd never seen her wear it until earlier that summer. He assumed that the brooch had come in the box of Petra's father's things, sent to her by the Ministry of Magic upon her coming of age.

Having made no such Christmas deal with Petra himself, however, James slipped outside late Christmas evening and found a bunch of dry weeds rooted behind some dumpsters. These he transfigured into a very satisfactory display of roses and tulips, which he encased in a simple Timeloop Charm, preventing them from wilting. He carried the flowers back up to the flat and bound them with a length of leftover Christmas ribbon. Finally, while everyone else was gathered around the fire downstairs, he sneaked into Petra's room and left the bouquet on her dresser along with a small note which read, simply, 'Happy Christmas Petra'.

Content with his handiwork, James went to bed that night and fell almost immediately to sleep. He dreamed of Clutchcudgel with his new gauntlets, and zombie Professor Straidthwait's hollow chuckle, and the mysterious riddle of the halls of Erebus Castle, complete with a ghostly figure of Professor Magnussen stalking warningly in the dimness, his eyes like chips of mica. Finally, in the deepest chasm of the night, James dreamed of the flat island surrounded by crashing surf and low, iron clouds. He dreamed of the black castle, both ancient and steadfast, and the figure watching from the balcony, her gaze heavy and hot, watching, waiting. Was it she that had alerted the members of the W.U.L.F. of the impending raid? Had Morgan somehow killed Tarrantus, leaving Petra, her alter ego, to take the blame? In the pit of the night, wrapped in the guileless lucidity of dreams, James thought it was entirely possible.

He wouldn't remember any of it the next morning, but his dreaming self tried to send out the message, tried to warn his subconscious of what was to come. *My job isn't to save Petra from Keynes the arbiter*, he realized as he wafted through the dreaming vision of the island, gazing up at the shadowy balcony. *My job is to save Petra from Morgan*.

My job, he thought from the depths of sleep, *is to save Petra from herself*.



17. THE BALLAD OF THE RIDER

Where the holiday break seemed to come and go like a flash of lightning, the spring semester unrolled before James like an interminable carpet with no end in sight. Albus, in particular, seemed to return to school with a rather bitter disposition.

"I thought we were going to be quit of this dump by now," he grumped as they stalked across the campus toward their morning's classes. A frigid wind scoured the mall beneath low, hulking clouds, making the boys' cloaks flap like sails.

"Hey," Zane said, his own typically cheerful disposition dampened by the arctic weather, "that's the Aleron you're talking about. I get why you might hate all your Wolfy pals back at Ares Mansion, but that's just them. Hate the player, don't hate the game."

"I'll hate whatever I bloody well want," Albus muttered darkly.

"I'm surprised," Ralph commented. "I thought you'd be fitting in just fine with the Werewolves. They don't seem that far removed from our mates back in Slytherin."

Albus scoffed humorlessly. "Hah. I'll take Tabitha Corsica over Olivia Jones any day. Tabitha may have turned out to be a little off her broom in the end, but at least *she* hated people on principle. These gits just hate anyone whose great-great-great grandparents didn't have the good fortune to have been on some stupid boat that landed at Plymouth bloody Rock."

James was surprised at his brother's sudden openness. He knew it would probably evaporate once he'd had a chance to settle into the routine of school again, but for now he took advantage of it.

"You mean," he said as evenly as possible, "that they give you a hard time just because you aren't an American?"

Albus pressed his lips together tightly and shook his head. "They're fine with the fact that I'm not an American, so long as I don't want to play Clutch or take part in the Morning Calisthenics Preparedness Corps or join their precious Salem-Dirgus Free Militia. Not that I *want* to do any of those things, mind you, but still, it gets a little old being constantly reminded that I'm shut out, whether I want in or not."

"What's old Stonewall say about it?" Zane asked, hefting his backpack against the icy wind.

"Oh, he talks a big game about how Werewolf House, like America in general, is the great melting pot, 'welcoming all into the arms of liberty, vigilance, and civil service', but the students are another cauldron of newts entirely. I suppose if I pressed the issue with Jackson, he'd make sure I got into whatever club or team I wanted, but then I'd just have to live with the Werewolves who'd tried to freeze me out to begin with. It's easier just to lay low and wait to get back home to Slytherin."

"Blimey," Ralph commented. "After your performance on the clock tower during the flag switch escapade, I'd have thought you'd be the Werewolves' golden boy."

"Yeah," Albus agreed sourly. "That impressed them all right. They said I showed a lot of promise 'for a Cornelius'."

"Hmm," James nodded, reticent to say anything more. Some small, petty part of him was meanly glad that Albus was having difficulties with his house. *Serves him right for always siding with whatever group seems the most dodgy and evil*, he thought. *First the Slytherins, and now these daft, nationalistic Werewolf stump-heads*. Still, seeing how unhappy Albus apparently was, James' spite was short-lived.

"Maybe you can come hang out with us at Apollo Mansion," he offered. "We have a pretty decent game room and Yeats makes a mean pizza, if you can talk him into it."

"Yeah, that's just what I want," Albus replied, rolling his eyes. "To start hanging out with the campus losers' club. Thanks but no thanks. Werewolf House may be a bunch of narrow-minded grunts, but they excel at house pride. And at least there I can look forward to a Clutchcudgel trophy this year. You guys will be lucky if you get a single win."

"He's got you there, James," Zane agreed unhelpfully. James was too cold to argue the issue and the boys trudged the rest of the way to class in silence.

Within the first week of school, James realized that he had entirely forgotten to ask Lucy about taking him, Ralph, and Zane on a tour of Erebus Castle so that they could try to solve the riddle of Magnussen's dimensional key.

Zane rolled his eyes as the three boys huddled around a table in the library near the top of the Tower of Art. "It's easy," he whispered. "You just ask Lucy to be your date to the Valentine's dance. Then, she'll *have* to say yes when you tack on that you want her to show us around the Vampires' castle."

James shook his head. "It's Lucy," he said. "I don't need to *trick* her or anything. I'll just ask her. Of course she'll say yes."

Zane shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "Have it your way. Me, I'd want a little insurance. I hear she was pretty put off by all the touchy-feely that went down between you and Petra over Christmas."

James' face heated with mingled embarrassment and surprise. "What? That's ridiculous! Nothing happened at all!"

Ralph grimaced uncomfortably. "I saw the two of you holding hands in the parlor," he admitted. "So did Lucy. She pretended not to be bothered by it, but she hid in her room for awhile afterwards."

"It wasn't like *that*," James sighed. "We were just talking. In fact, we were talking about how we're going to try to clear her name."

"Seems to me you should have been talking to Lucy about that," Zane chided. "*She's* the one whose go-ahead we need to get into Erebus Castle."

"Look, Lucy isn't Cheshire Chatterly and I'm not you," James said, throwing a look at Zane. "I can't trick her like that."

"There weren't any tricks involved with me and Cheshire," Zane replied a bit defensively. "I got us the key to the Archive and Cheshire got to dance with me at the Halloween Ball. It was a win-win for everyone."

James crossed his arms on the library table and rested his chin on them. "It's different for you. Cheshire wasn't... *sweet* on you to begin with."

Zane frowned thoughtfully. "She was afterwards," he replied with a shrug.

"Maybe Ralph can do it," James offered, sitting up again. "How could anyone say no to that face?"

Ralph glanced from Zane to James, his brow knitted.

Zane shook his head. "It's your ballgame, James. Unless you know any real-life vampires, Lucy's our only in. Do it however you want, but you'd better do it quick-like. That Keynes guy won't take forever to make his judgment about Petra."

James knew that Zane was right. He also knew that they were probably making a much bigger deal out of the task than it deserved. Lucy was his cousin, after all. Still, her apparent infatuation with him tended to complicate matters in ways he couldn't predict. To be safe, he determined he would ask her after the next Clutchcudgel match. Team Bigfoot was scheduled to face off against Vampire House again and the odds were that despite James' best efforts, the Vamps would win handily. This would put Lucy in a good mood, rendering her more receptive to James' request. Having decided this, James dismissed the matter for the time being.

Friday evening rolled around and James made his way to Pepperpock Down. There, he suited up in his Clutchcudgel gear alongside Jazmine, Gobbins, Wentworth, and the rest of Team Bigfoot.

"Nice new gauntlets," Jazmine said appreciatively. "Christmas present?"

James nodded proudly. "Yeah, from my dad."

"All I got was a bunch of hair potions and a box set of Remora's awful novels," Jazmine said, frowning. "My mother is just crazy about them. She was hoping that I'd end up in Vampire House, or even Pixie. She says Bigfoot isn't very 'Veela-like'."

James didn't know how to respond to that. "One of my aunts is part-Veela," he ventured. "For what it's worth, I prefer you to her most days."

Jazmine smiled at him as she strapped on her shin pads.

"Let's go, team," Wood called from partway up the gantry stairs. "I hope you all wore your long underwear. It's right frigid up there tonight."

James grabbed his skrim and followed the team as they tramped up the steps into the windy evening. The sky over the gantries was cloudless, darkening toward sunset with a dusting of stars just beginning to twinkle high above. All around, the parapet grandstands were filled with cheering and jeering students, most waving the red and black banners of Vampire House.

"We're the goats for tonight's match," Wood called over the noise, hunkering in the center of the huddled players. "If the Vampires win tonight, it knocks us clean out of the playoffs and seals their standings. Most of the people here tonight want to see a Werewolf-Vampire championship match, so sentiment is stacked pretty heavily against us. You've played excellently this year, team, even though there's been a lot more offensive magic than I am, frankly, comfortable with. No matter what, we can walk away from tonight's match with our heads held high. As always, let's keep it clean out there and do our ruddy best. All right?"

The team rumbled their agreement and piled their hands atop Wood's outstretched fist for the traditional rallying cry. "*GooOO FEET!*" they shouted in unison, and then broke apart, lining up along the edge of the platform.

"I don't know about you," Norrick muttered to James, "but I don't plan to let the Vampires have this one without a fight."

James nodded. "You been practicing up on that Solarflack bit that Wentworth came up with?"

"Spent half my Christmas break on it," Norrick replied with a grim smile. "In this darkness, it'll blind anybody who tries to ambush me from the rear and maybe force one or two of them to drop the Clutch if they try to pass me."

"Nice," James agreed. "At least we've already gotten one tie game under our belts this year, eh? If it hadn't been for that, I bet half of these people would have stayed home tonight. Now they know that we'll be making those Vampires work for it."

In the air between the gantries, Professor Sanuye drifted like a dandelion seed on his official's broomstick. He blew a sharp blast on his whistle and James saw Jazmine kick off the platform, angling toward the center ring. The rest of the team followed, falling into position.

"Here goes nothing," Norrick grinned. "Into the breach!"

A moment later, both boys launched from the platform, leaning into the cold wind and squatting low over their skrims.

Sixty seconds later, after a single tense warm-up lap, Sanuye blew a long note on his whistle. James lunged forward on his skrim, launching it into a rocket-like acceleration, and immediately passed two Vampires. He darted through the center ring and, before he knew it, had captured one of the Clutches. He tucked it under his left arm and produced his wand from its sheath.

"Potter!" Gobbins called from behind him. "Two Bullies at twelve o'clock, dropping fast!"

James ducked on his skrim and pulled back, decelerating so quickly that the Clutch tried to squirt from beneath his arm. Almost instantly, two Vampire players dropped out of the darkness ahead of him, colliding with one another and bouncing out of the course. James leapt upwards, pulling his skrim with him, and somersaulted over the Bullies, barely passing through the nearest ring.

Artis Decerto, he thought to himself with a grin. *Who'd have thought it'd come in handy on the Clutch course? I'll have to start teaching that to the team as well.*

Still accelerating, James dodged through the course, completing his requisite laps before lobbing the Clutch through the goal ring. As soon as he released the Clutch, however, he jabbed his wand at it.

"*Duplicitous!*" he cried, and there was a flash of purple. Out of the flash, *three* Clutches seemed to spin toward the goal instead of one. The Vampire Keeper hesitated for only a moment, and then swatted her Cudgel at the middle of the three balls. The Cudgel passed right through the phantom Clutch, however, allowing the real Clutch to flash through the goal ring behind her. A roar erupted from the crowd as James flew on, his hair whipping in the cold wind, and he couldn't tell if the spectators were cheering or booing, nor did he care.

By halftime, James was stunned to realize that the Vampires were leading Team Bigfoot by only four points. The Bigfoots were greatly heartened by this fact and entered the second half of the match with a steadfast determination to at least end the game in a tie. It would still result in a technical victory for Vampire House, but at least the Bigfoots could go home feeling that they had achieved a symbolic victory, if nothing else.

It was very hard to keep track of the actual score while the match was in progress since there were, at any given time, three Clutches in play. James glanced up at the scoreboard occasionally and saw that by the fourth quarter, the Bigfoots had, in fact, matched the Vampires almost exactly throughout the second half of the game. The score hovered at forty-six to forty-five, with Team Vampire clinging to a very fragile lead.

"Jazmine has a Clutch!" Norrick called, swooping alongside James. "You make sure she gets to the goal! The rest of us will drop on their Clippers like a ton of bricks, all right?"

"Got it!" James called with a curt nod. He glanced aside and saw Jazmine ducking through the course behind him, her cape flashing orange in the stadium lights. James dropped to one knee on his skrim, grabbing the nose with both hands as the board ground to a halt beneath him. Jazmine circled around and saw him waiting. She nodded her understanding.

"Time to mow the lawn," James announced, launching to full speed again and moving directly in front of Jazmine. He produced his wand and trained it on the Vampire Bullies ahead. A quick gravity well sucked them both out of the rings, allowing James and Jazmine to soar past without so much as a dip in their course. The rings flashed by and James aimed again, using a Lanyard Charm to twitch the end of another Vampire's skrim, causing him to lose control and veer out of the rings. James glanced up in time to see that Norrick had succeeded in forcing one of the Vampire Clippers out of the course using his Solarflack Hex. Bursts of stunning light still sparkled in his wake as he pumped his fist triumphantly in the air.

"We're nearly there, Jazmine!" James called back. "Nail the shot and we might just knot this match!"

James circled around the last length of the figure eight course and prepared to drop out of the way, giving Jazmine room to aim. As he dipped, however, a shadow flickered over the end of his skrim. Glancing up, he saw that the second Vampire Clipper had caught up to Jazmine. The Clipper raised his own Clutch overhead, preparing to shoot for the goal at exactly the same time as Jazmine. Without thinking, James raised his wand once more, calling out his spell at exactly the same moment that both Clippers released their Clutches.

What happened next happened nearly too fast to watch, and yet, in James' mind, it seemed to take hours. He saw Jazmine's Clutch arc through the air, tracking alongside the Vampire Clipper's shot, but Jazmine's aim was too low; her Clutch was going to miss the goal entirely. James' Lanyard Charm, however, neatly caught the Vampire's Clutch. With a flick of his wand, James twitched the opponent's Clutch downwards, forcing it to dip and then bob up again. The Vampire's Clutch collided in midair with Jazmine's, altering its course. A split second later, both Clutches soared through the goal ring, past the two Keepers, who had moved aside in an effort not to accidentally block their own team's shot.

James rocketed beneath the goal ring into sudden silence. He glanced back, saw Jazmine's look of stunned disbelief, and then startled as the grandstands exploded into wild, deafening cheers all around.

"We scored a knockpoint!" Jazmine cried in amazement, catching up to James and smacking him on the shoulder. "A knockpoint, James! I can't even remember the last time that happened!"

"What's a knockpoint?" James called over the noise of the crowd. The rest of the team was catching up to them now, forming a midair dog-pile all around him.

"You knocked our Clutch against theirs and put them both through the goal!" Jazmine yelled, laughing. "That makes *both* points ours! We get double the score, James!"

"You mean," James said, buffeting as the team collapsed around him and Jazmine, "we won?"

"We won!" Norrick hollered, laughing. "Holy hinkypunks! We won!"

The rest of the team joined in the shout, proclaiming their victory and pushing James and Jazmine upwards between them. As one wild, bobbing bunch, the team drifted toward their platform and broke apart on top of it, roaring with triumphant delight.

"And in a shocking, record-breaking upset," Cheshire Chatterly's voice cried, echoing from the announcer's booth, "Team Bigfoot snatches their first victory in nearly twelve years with an amazing game-winning knockpoint goal by the combined efforts of team captain Jazmine Jade and newcomer James Sirius Potter! With that, Team Vampire's playoffs hopes are put on hold for at least one more match while Team Bigfoot refuses to be bumped out for the season. What a match, folks! What... a... match!"

Out of the darkness of the platform, a figure nearly bowled James over, calling his name. "James! You big genius, you! A knockpoint win! How'd you do that?!"

"Zane!" James laughed, struggling to stay upright. "I don't know! I didn't even know what a knockpoint was until it happened! How'd you get up here?"

"Me and Ralph came up ten minutes ago when we thought you were just going to tie the match," Zane replied excitedly.

"Wood said we could watch the rest of the match from up here," Ralph added, grinning. "What a party, eh?"

"First victory in over a decade," Gobbins announced, clapping James heartily on the shoulder pads. "Thanks to our new magic coach, James Potter! Come on, everyone! Victory party at the Kite and Key in twenty minutes! Let's see if we still remember how to do it, eh?"

With raucous whoops of delight and a great tramping of feet, Team Bigfoot clambered down the steps to the locker cellar, singing the Bigfoot House anthem and virtually carrying James and Jazmine on their shoulders.

It wasn't until an hour and a half later that James remembered his intention of asking Lucy about getting a tour of Erebus Castle. He was just leaving the Kite and Key when he spotted her at a table populated by a gaggle of morose-looking Vampire students. He didn't think anything of it—after all, Vampire students made quite a show of being morose at nearly every moment—until she got up and met him near the door.

"Congratulations, cousin," she said a little stiffly. "You wanted to talk to me about something?"

"Yeah," James nodded, remembering that he had asked her to find him after the match. "Er, are you heading back to the castle now? We could walk together."

Lucy studied him for a moment, and then nodded somberly. James pushed open the back door of the Kite and Key, letting in a gust of wintry air and sand-like snow crystals.

"Er," he said as the two of them walked into the darkness of the campus, "this is a little awkward. I hadn't exactly expected to win tonight, you know."

"You did very well," Lucy said coolly. "A knockpoint. The Vampires say that that hasn't happened in forever. They say you just got lucky, but I stuck up for you. I told them you're very talented in a lot of ways."

James was glad that they were walking in the darkness. He felt extremely awkward all of a sudden.

"Thanks, Lu," he said. "I wanted to ask you a favor, like."

Lucy stopped walking and peered up at him, her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What?"

"I—" James began, and then swallowed hard. "Er, I was just thinking. Ralph and Zane and me, we're really interested in checking out Erebus Castle. We've heard some stuff about it and we thought it'd be neat to give it a once over, you know? But according to the house rules, we can't get in unless we're accompanied by a Vampire student or a real-life vampire. So, you being in Vampire House and all..."

"Why are you so interested in Erebus Castle all of a sudden?" Lucy asked, her eyes still narrowed in the darkness, watching James critically.

"It's nothing, really. I mean..." He stopped, gulped again, and then decided, on the spur of the moment, to change his tactic. "I thought you'd like to go to the Valentine's dance with me?"

Lucy's face looked pained for a very brief moment, but she quickly hid it. "This has something to do with Petra Morganstern, doesn't it?"

James blinked, stunned. "What...?" he stammered. "I mean, how...? No, of course not, don't be silly."

"I saw you two talking over Christmas, James," Lucy said, looking away. "I don't know what it is you're planning or what it has to do with the castle, but you could at least have paid me the compliment of being honest." She shook her head slightly, and when she looked up at him again, there were tears standing in her eyes. "Really, James? The Valentine's dance? Like I'd want to go with you to that anyway."

She glanced away again, swiping a hand angrily across her face.

"Look, Lu," James said, taking a step closer. "Sorry. It was Zane's idea. I'll tell you the truth if you really want to know. It isn't what you think it is. Really."

"I don't think anything at all, you big git," Lucy said, her voice thick. "And I don't want to know, either way. Whatever it is you're looking for in Erebus Castle, you can find someone else to be your ticket in."

She turned and stalked away before James could respond. After a dozen steps, she turned back again, barely a shadowy shape in the darkness.

"And just so you know," she called, "there are *loads* of people who want to take me to the Valentine's dance. What, do you think I've just been waiting for *you* to come along and ask? You're my cousin, James. Don't be such a creep."

Having delivered her final salvo, she spun on her heel again and nearly ran into the trees, making black scrapes on the snow-crusted footpath.

James watched her go, feeling utterly foolish and miserably angry at himself. He considered chasing after her, but some deep wise inner voice told him that that would only make matters worse.

With a disconsolate sigh, James turned around himself. Much more slowly, he trudged into the darkness, heading for the distant, blocky shape of Apollo Mansion.



Over the course of the following week, a sudden warm snap descended over the campus, melting the ice and snow from the footpaths and reducing the campus' freight of icicles to steadily dripping crystal nubs. James, Ralph, and Zane spent most of their free time trying to think of another way into Erebus Castle, but encountered no success whatsoever. Their final effort had been to sneak away after Thursday afternoon's Cursology class, which was held in the castle's smoked-glass moonroom. This had failed almost immediately, however, when a small portrait of a very stern wizard with a pointed goatee had cornered them on the landing of the main staircase.

"*Halt* right there, gentlemen," the portrait pronounced as they crept past. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Shh," Zane hissed, turning back. "We're just looking around a bit. Don't get your widow's peak out of joint."

The portrait smiled a little disconcertingly. "Only residents of Erebus Castle are allowed upstairs, my friends," it said in a suddenly silky voice. "But what can I do about it? Me, a mere painting. Do as you wish, but consider yourselves warned."

"That's more like it," Zane muttered, turning back toward the stairs. The boys made it halfway up to the second landing when the risers suddenly shuddered beneath their feet. With a loud *thunk*, the step immediately above James' feet retracted sideways into the wall, leaving a gaping black hole in its place. The next step down followed, nearly pitching James forward into the darkness beneath the steps. He scrambled backwards, bumping into Zane and Ralph, and the stairs

began to retract more quickly, chasing them back the way they had come. The three boys clambered wildly back down the stairs, falling over each other, until they reached the main landing once again and crashed, panting, to the wooden floor.

"What was that all about?" Zane exclaimed angrily, struggling to his feet.

"You were warned," the portrait sniffed mildly.

"Warned nothing!" James said. "You might've told us that we were about to get tossed to our dooms!"

The portrait clucked its tongue indignantly. "The fall wouldn't have killed you," it said. "The rats might've though. They've become rather an advanced vicious little tribe down there, after living for so many years in a magical castle."

James peered into the darkness beneath the stairs. He fancied he could hear faint scratchings and even the clicking of little teeth.

"Wow," Ralph shuddered. "That is *so* not right."

With a loud *kachunk*, the stairsteps suddenly socked back into place, covering the hole.

"Perhaps next time you three will consider abiding by the rules," the portrait commented sternly. "And respecting your elders, painted or otherwise. Now be gone with you before I alert the House President."

That got the boys moving since the last thing they wanted was any entanglements with Professor Remora.

"I can't believe we don't know anyone else in Vampire House," Zane groaned as they made their way toward the cafeteria for lunch. "I mean, let's face it: I'm a loveable guy. *Everybody* gets along with me."

"Maybe we should just try to follow Magnussen into the past without knowing what the dimensional key is," James offered considerably. "Perhaps if we just hang back and watch him, we'll be able to figure it out, right?"

"Maybe," Ralph said, shrugging. "But I'd sure hate to get that bit wrong. We only get one chance. Rose says that time travel is really tetchy that way."

"What do you mean," Zane asked as they pulled open the doors to Administration Hall, following a gaggle of older students toward the cafeteria. "I don't think I was there for that conversation. Not that I don't love Rose's hectoring predictions about all the ways we might destroy the fabric of the universe and all."

James sighed. "She says it's the reason why Time-Turners have been outlawed. Technomancy guys like Jackson have discovered that it's super dangerous for one person to occupy the same timeframe more than once. Something about identical matter accidentally coming together and causing 'catastrophic pluralities' or something quantum like that. Bottom line is that if we don't capture Magnussen's dimensional key the first time out, we won't have another chance without potentially causing way more trouble than we hope to prevent."

"So how sure are you that we really *have* to do this anyway?" Ralph asked, getting in line and grabbing a tray. "You still think the real bad guys are hiding out in the World Between the Worlds?"

"No doubt in my mind," James replied, with a little more conviction than he actually felt. "That missing crimson thread is far too powerful to just disappear without a trace. If it was in our world, somebody somewhere would have sensed its trail. The only place it could possibly be hidden is outside of our dimension. It just makes sense."

"Well then, I guess we're back to square one," Zane said, grabbing two bowls of green pudding and cramming them onto his already filled tray. "To get into the World Between the Worlds, we need to get Magnussen's dimensional key, which means we need to somehow get into Erebus Castle so we can figure out the riddle of what the key actually *is*." He sighed briskly. "Maybe we should just hex Ralph's teeth into points and try to pass him off as Count Ralphula the Impaler. What do you say, Ralphinator? Worth a shot?"

"Don't even start," Ralph said, shaking his head.

The boys found a place at one of the long tables, cramming in across from Wentworth, who was distracted by a series of fussy sneezes.

"What's with you, Went?" James asked, poking at his stew with a fork.

"Garlic," Wentworth replied, wiping his nose. "It's my special diet. I'm not even eating the stuff, but I can still smell it in everyone else's lunch. Breaks me all out."

Zane stirred his own bowl. "Yeah, this stuff's pretty heavy with it. Too bad for you, Went. It's yum in the tum."

Wentworth sniffled. "Yeah, well, you all could show a little more sensitivity. I can't help being this way, you know. It's in my genes, all the way back to what my parents call 'the old country'." He rolled his eyes and shook his head. James watched as the smaller boy reached for a large stoneware mug. Wentworth pinched his nose and drank from it carefully.

"Just out of curiosity," Zane suddenly said, frowning at Wentworth, "where, exactly, *is* 'the old country'?"

Wentworth peered over his mug at Zane a little warily. "Somewhere in Europe," he answered. "A little region in Romania, if you must know."

"Really," Zane said, still frowning. "Does it start with a 'T', maybe?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about it," Wentworth announced, lowering his mug but holding it near his chest. "My mother says we're not like that anymore. She says the less we talk about it, the better."

"What're you drinking there, Went?" James asked, peering over the table.

"It's nothing," Went said. "It's for my special diet. It's not like I *want* to drink it, you know. Ten ounces a day is all."

"Is that tomato juice?" Ralph said, using his height to peek into Wentworth's mug. "Looks... too dark, somehow."

"It's juice!" Wentworth proclaimed, covering the cup with his hand. "Er, kind of. That's all you need to know! What?"

Zane glanced from Ralph to James. "Wentworth, do me a little favor," he said smoothly, realization dawning on his suddenly crafty face. "Give 'ums one of those big 'old world' smiles, eh?"

"Yeah, Went," James added curiously. "Let's see those teeth."



"Coming through!" Zane called out, pushing Wentworth through the front door of Erebus Mansion like a boy-sized battering ram. "Vampire here! You have to let us in!"

"Stop," Wentworth insisted, blushing furiously. "Nobody is supposed to know!"

"It's all right," James soothed, following close behind. "You're among your fellow 'creatures of the night' here."

"What's going on?" a tall boy demanded in an imperious voice, moving to block the four intruders in the foyer. "You can't just barge in here. This is for Vampire House members and their guests only."

"*And* real-life vampires," Zane added, patting Wentworth on the top of his head. "Says so in your house charter. 'Any roaming vampires seeking asylum or succor are welcome within these halls.' I looked it up to be sure. I thought the word 'succor' was a nice play on words. That's got Remora written all over it, doesn't it?"

"This kid's no vampire," the boy sneered, looking down his nose at Wentworth. "Get out of here before I call the professor."

"Go ahead and call her," James nodded. "Went here has the teeth *and* the pedigree. He's the real deal, right down to his ten ounce blood ration a day and an unnatural allergy to garlic and garlic-related root veg. Tell him, Went."

"I'm really sorry," Wentworth said, his cheeks burning. "I had nothing to do with this. No one's supposed to know, really. My parents made special arrangements with the school..."

"Oh, let them in, Harding," a girl said from a nearby sofa. "Who cares? Remora isn't even here."

"This kid's no vampire, no matter what these cretins say," the boy, Harding, declared, narrowing his eyes, his nostrils flaring. "No vampire, *no* entry."

"But look at his teeth," Ralph insisted, guiding Went under the nearest chandelier. "They may not be the sorts of fangs you read about in Professor Remora's books, but they're plenty pointy if you look at them in the right light. Show them, Went. See?"

"Anyone can hex a pair of fangs," Harding replied, rolling his eyes.

"Let me take a look at the boy," another voice said, its tone polite but commanding. James glanced around. The portrait of the stern-faced man with the pointed beard was staring down at them from the lower landing. Harding looked from the portrait to Wentworth, considering. Finally, reluctantly, the taller boy nodded toward the landing.

"Make it quick and then vanish, why don't you?" he growled.

James, Zane, and Ralph followed Wentworth closely, crowding up onto the landing. The portrait narrowed its eyes at the small boy. James glanced at the little brass plaque affixed to the bottom of the portrait's round frame. It read, '*Niles Covington Erebus III*'.

"Only moderately developed in the canines," the portrait said thoughtfully. "But real enough, I suspect. Hmm. There's only one way to know for certain. Mr. Harding, if you would turn me around, please."

Obediently, the sneering boy climbed onto the landing and sidled toward the painting. Eyes still narrowed at Wentworth, he lifted the painting of Niles Erebus from the wall. When he turned it around, James was surprised to see that the rear of the painting was a mirror.

"Look at yourself, young man," Erebus said, apparently speaking to Wentworth.

Comically, everyone on the landing leaned toward the mirror.

"HO-leee HINKYpunks!" Zane breathed in amazement. "Went! Where are you?"

Still peering into the mirror, James reached aside with his right hand. His fingers patted Wentworth on the face, knocking the boy's glasses askew. In the mirror, however, James' fingers moved over empty space.

"Hey," Wentworth said, annoyed, straightening his glasses. "Quit it, already."

"He's not there!" Ralph exclaimed. "He's invisible in the mirror!"

"I don't see what the big deal is," Wentworth announced wearily. "It's not like some kind of superpower or anything. You have any idea how hard it is to comb your hair if you can't see yourself in a mirror?"

"Well, Mr. Harding," the portrait of Erebus said from the reverse side of the Mirror, "it would appear that this young man is, indeed, the real article. According to the house rules, he and his guests must be granted entrance."

"But," Harding said, disgusted, "look at him! That's not what a vampire is supposed to look like!"

"And you are an expert on these things, of course," Erebus sighed. "Fear not. I will accompany our guests during their visit and assure that they do not wander where they are unwelcome. After all, being granted entrance does not amount to *carte blanche* access to anywhere they wish, does it?"

"It sure doesn't," Harding nodded dourly. He sneered at Zane again and then, rather stiffly, handed him the small portrait. "Enjoy your stay, gentlemen."

"Thanks, Harding," Zane grinned, taking the portrait. "Your vigilance is inspiring. I'll put in a good word for you with all the other vampires I know." He winked at the older boy.

"Well then, my friends," Erebus said briskly as Harding skulked back down to the parlor, "now that you have attained something approaching a *legitimate* entrance, I believe you were on your way to the upper corridor. Shall we proceed together this time with better luck?"

Over the course of the next hour, James, Ralph, Wentworth, and Zane wandered the myriad halls, landings, secret stairways, hidden chambers, dens, bathrooms, and various common spaces of the castle, all the while listening to an informative, if slightly pedantic monologue from Erebus' portrait about the details of each space. Apart from being somewhat amazed at the sheer number of rooms crammed into the castle, the boys found nothing that illuminated the riddle of Ignatius Magnussen's dimensional key.

"I don't get it," Zane finally proclaimed, plopping onto a chair on the third-floor landing. "How'd the quote go? 'The truth walked the halls of Erebus Castle,' right? Well, we've walked more halls than I can count and I didn't encounter any truth. Did you?"

James shook his head. "I didn't realize it would be this hard. I thought once we got inside, it'd just make sense, somehow."

"Might I inquire," the portrait of Niles Erebus said with a somewhat impatient sniff, "what you gentlemen are talking about?"

"You got me," Wentworth announced, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. "I'm just the token vampire. I decided these three were totally nuts three floors ago."

"It's this riddle we heard," Ralph admitted, leaning the portrait on a windowsill so he could look at it. "Some old professor from a long time ago said it: the truth walked the halls of Erebus Castle. You seem to know an awful lot about this place. Any ideas what it might mean?"

"I built this castle," Erebus said, bristling. "I should think I would know everything that could possibly be known about it. Your riddle, however, is rather hopelessly obtuse. Without any sort of context, it could mean anything at all."

James sighed. "What a complete waste of time. It was probably just something Magnussen made up after all, just to throw everyone off his trail."

"Magnussen, you say?" the portrait asked, raising one eyebrow. "Ignatius Magnussen?"

"Yeah," Ralph replied, perking up a little. "You know anything about him?"

"Virtually nothing," Erebus answered dismissively. "He was rather after my time as you've apparently failed to notice. In my current state, however, I do recall seeing him visit the castle from time to time. The man had a bit of a fascination, it seemed."

"How'd he get in?" James asked. "He wasn't a vampire too, was he?"

Erebus rolled his eyes impatiently. "*Obviously* the rules of entrance do not apply to faculty and administration, young man. Every house is regularly frequented by professors from different societies, both for social and academic reasons."

"So where did Magnussen go when *he* was here?" Zane asked impatiently.

"I did not have to chaperone *him* during his visits," Erebus answered disdainfully. "But I do recall that he took copious notes about some of the tapestries."

Zane looked hard at James, his eyebrows raised. "Tapestries," he repeated. "Can we, maybe, see these tapestries?"

Erebus sighed dramatically. "Second floor," he drawled. "North corridor. And do try not to carry my frame like that, young man. There might be less pleasant views in the world than your armpit, but I am hard-pressed to think of any at the moment."

"Sorry," Ralph muttered, taking the frame from beneath his arm.

When they finally arrived at the second-floor corridor, James was surprised to find that they had somehow missed this area during their earlier tour. The corridor was quite high, lined with windows on one side and very old floor-length tapestries on the other. The windows were covered with thick golden curtains, pulled tightly closed.

"It's so dark," Ralph said, creeping slowly into the hall. "I can barely see in here."

"*Luminos*," the portrait of Erebus said in a low voice. In response, a series of crystal chandeliers began to glow, flames growing silently from their previously unlit candles.

"The tapestries are quite ancient," Erebus explained as the boys walked along the corridor, watching as the candlelight flickered over the woven images. "Erebus family treasures, in fact, passed down through many generations. Sunlight has faded them over the centuries, thus they are now kept secluded in darkness, preserved as well as they can be."

James took a step closer to the first of the huge tapestries. The threadwork was very fine, reminding him of the neat weaving of the Loom of Destinies. Unlike the Loom, however, the images shown here were not abstract. Each illustration was skillfully rendered, even lifelike. James almost expected them to begin moving.

"It looks like they tell a story," Wentworth commented, his voice unconsciously hushed.

"An astute observation, my friend," Erebus replied. "These are, in fact, a complete series, telling an ancient tale known as the Ballad of the Rider."

"I've never heard of it," Zane commented.

Erebus chuckled humorlessly. “Nor am I surprised. It is not the sort of tale the wizarding world tends to repeat. It is a tragedy, in fact, and a very dark one.”

James peered up at the nearest tapestry again. On it, a tall, grave man with a black beard sat upon a horse. On closer inspection, James realized that the horse was, in fact, a unicorn, dappled grey, with powerful forelegs and a mane of shimmering gold. Every line and thread of the image implied that the rider and the unicorn were regal, solemn, almost glorious. Behind them, a wildly colourful and ornate starburst stretched from one edge of the tapestry to the other. Along the bottom were dozens of hands and faces, all leering up toward the Rider, pointing, shouting, crying carefully woven blue tears of delight or terror.

“What’s happening in this one?” James asked, a little breathlessly.

“That,” Erebus intoned solemnly, “is the arrival of the Rider. According to the Ballad, his coming was marked by a blinding curtain of light, as if one of the very stars had descended from the night sky and settled, for one twinkling moment, on a hilltop. The Rider appeared from within the light, which vanished behind him. This was in the Dark Ages of Europe, and as you might imagine, his arrival caused great fear among those who witnessed it. The Rider explained himself, however, describing his home in a different reality, one similar to our own, but utterly peaceful and advanced in both the healing and magical arts. To prove his assertions, he described the process by which his world’s foremost witches and wizards had discovered the existence of other realities and learned how they were all bound together by one central core: the Nexus. Using their arts, they created a portal into the Nexus with hopes of reaching out to other dimensions. His purpose, he claimed, was to venture into less fortunate realities and share the wealth of their learning.”

“The Nexus,” Zane whispered, nodding. “This fits perfectly with everything we’ve heard about the Nexus Curtain and the World Between the Worlds.”

Together, the four boys drifted toward the next tapestry. This one showed the bearded Rider standing at the head of a table, surrounded by seated witches and wizards. The Rider’s posture implied that he was speaking, his arm raised in a gesture of conjuring. Over the table hovered a fanciful representation of a globe, covered with jungles, mountains, waterfalls, and placid oceans. The globe’s continents were dotted with magnificent cities, its oceans streaked by sailing vessels with bright blue sails. The vision was contrived to seem as if it was spreading beams of light all around the room, but the listeners at the table seemed not to notice. Their faces were caricatures of wickedness: porcine and bloated, grinning and narrow-eyed, some with their heads bowed together in obvious conspiracy.

“Ohhh,” Ralph said, nodding with realization. “He’s describing his dimension to everybody.”

“Doesn’t much look like they’re listening though,” James added.

Erebus frowned inside his frame. “Indeed not. The Rider fell into the council of greedy witches and wizards, who were far less interested in the gifts of his enlightenment than they were the dark magic they believed could be gleaned from him and his unicorn. Until then, there had been no such beasts in our world, you see, and these crafty witches and wizards instinctively understood that this was a creature of fabulous power. Thus, they bided their time, pretending to listen, all the while

plotting how to steal the man's magic and use it against him. In truth, their intention, horribly, was to learn the use of the Rider's portal and invade his reality, taking whatever they wished by force and domination."

"Some welcoming committee," Wentworth said sourly.

Zane asked, "So were they able to do it?"

"Fortunately for us, they were not," Erebus replied. "Had their scheme succeeded, our own reality would surely have descended into horrors, taking many more with it, perhaps even to destruction. The balance of the Destinies prevailed, however, halting their evil plans, but not without cost."

The group stood before the third tapestry now. On it, men in dark robes crowded around the unicorn, which was reared on its hind hooves, pawing at the air, its teeth bared in desperation. Around its neck and connected to the fists of its dark adversaries was a collection of restraining ropes. Worse, a crooked dagger was raised in the hand of one of the dark wizards, pointing toward the unicorn's dappled flank. In the foreground, the Rider seemed to be in a duel with several of the dark wizards, his face noble yet resigned, as he was hopelessly outnumbered by his foes.

Erebus spoke, continuing his recitation of the Ballad. "Once the horrid plan was placed into action, the Rider was imprisoned. His unicorn was experimented upon and forced to breed with common horses, all in an attempt to create more of its kind. This, of course, is the origin of the few unicorns that still roam the deepest woods of our day, less powerful than their noble ancestor, but still glorious. In the end, the Rider succeeded in mustering his powers for an escape. Being peaceful, he attempted to spare his captors' lives, but they viewed his mercy as weakness. In the end, they chased him and his unicorn down, subduing them both by sheer numbers. Unable to wrest the secret of the Nexus from him, they eventually killed him and hopelessly wounded his unicorn at the same time."

James shook his head. "That's perfectly beastly," he said in a low voice.

"It gets worse," Erebus admitted stoically.

The gathering moved to the last tapestry. It glowed in the candlelight, somehow both more vibrant and more ghastly than the others. The scene showed a moonlit forest, dominated by a huddle of the dark-robed witches and wizards. They seemed to be bent over something, obscuring it.

"What are they doing?" Ralph asked tentatively, frowning at the tall image. "What's all that silvery stuff running all over the ground?"

"Alas," Erebus replied darkly, "according to the Ballad, the evil witches and wizards realized that their plan had been foiled. They had murdered their only hope of conquering the other dimensions and mortally wounded the creature that might have granted them powers beyond their dreams. In a final, ghastly attempt to harness the magic of that hidden realm, they fell upon the wounded unicorn and consumed its blood, still warm from its failing heart. As they feasted upon it, piteously, the poor beast died."

"Unmoved by the extremity of their crimes and grown cruelly powerful by their draught of the unicorn's blood, these witches and wizards turned into legends of horror for decades thereafter. They had become virtually unstoppable, you see, darkly magical and inhumanly strong. They were known to strike terror into the hearts of all they met since both their eyes and mouths glowed with a pale silvery light, forever tainted by the blood of their prey. To cover this, they fashioned masks of metal, even more terrible than their human faces, and wore them as signs of their fraternity. For nearly a century, these beasts in human form ruled with mayhem, torture, and murder, known universally by the name that they had chosen for themselves, a name that explained both the source of their powers and the depths of their depravity. 'Death Eaters', they called themselves; a word that became synonymous with dark ambition, inhumanity, and power at any cost."

"*They* were the original Death Eaters?" James asked faintly, staring up at the horrible image. "But... Voldemort...?"

"The devil cannot create," Erebus said evenly. "He can only pervert. The villain your age knew as Voldemort adopted the policies of these, his spiritual brethren. He took their name and claimed it for himself, but he did not invent it."

Shuddering, Wentworth asked, "So, what ever became of those guys?"

"Over the decades, heroes of stout heart and courage hunted them down," Erebus answered, nodding gravely in his frame. "Many knights died in the attempt, but one by one, the Death Eaters were dispatched, their heads cut from their shoulders and buried while their bodies were burned to dust. In the end, only one remained, a woman named Proserpine. She was finally cornered in her secret citadel, deep in a tractless forest. There, rather than facing her pursuers, she took her own life, leaving her own severed head smiling on the doorstep, its eyes still glowing with dead malevolence. Her body, the legends claim, was never found."

Ralph shivered. "Hellooo, nightmares," he squeaked.

"What about the unicorn's body?" Wentworth asked, shaking his head. "Didn't they try to preserve that somehow?"

Erebus scoffed lightly. "The Death Eaters cared not for preserving the corpse of their victim. According to legend, however, explorers did eventually find the poor creature's skeleton, complete with its magical horn. Rather than burying it or bringing it back, they decided to leave it as a memorial, hidden within a seamless blanket of unplottability, forever at rest. They did bring back one thing, though, as proof of their discovery: a single silver horseshoe, which they claimed was still attached to the beast's right front hoof, gleaming and uncorrupted. For centuries, that very horseshoe was a symbol of humility and regret, kept safe by a council of knights whose sole job was to watch for the appearance of any more delegates from the dimension beyond. If such a delegate were ever to appear, the horseshoe was to be returned to them in homage, a humble, insufficient apology for the crime that had been committed against their people."

"Wow," Zane said softly, somber for once. "So are those knights still out there somewhere, guarding the horseshoe and watching for anyone from that other dimension?"

"Alas, no," Erebus sighed. "My family was the last of those knights, and I was the last of my family, come to this new country in the hopes of finding a permanent hiding place for the relic. As a result, the horseshoe was granted to this college, an heirloom and a sacred trust. Unfortunately, by then, its significance had been all but lost. For many years, it was preserved in the museum atop the Tower of Art, well guarded but forgotten. Now, I suspect, none even remember that it was ever there."

"Why?" James asked, blinking suddenly. "What happened to it? Where is it now?"

Erebus chuckled ruefully. "That, as they used to say in my time, is the thousand Drummel question. It seems that sometime after my own death, the horseshoe was borrowed from the museum and never returned. Obviously, I myself am less than clear on the details—we portraits have rather a difficult time absorbing much of what happens beyond our own deaths—but I believe that the horseshoe went into the library of a trusted private collector. I suppose I should care more about it, seeing as I was the last of a long line of those whose duty was to protect the relic. But as I said, death offers its own unique perspective, one facet of which is that it becomes exceedingly easy not to give a damn. I can only hope that the horseshoe has been well cared for. Or, at the very least, been tossed into a very, very deep well."

James' eyes had grown wide as he listened. Silently, he turned to look at Ralph, and then Zane. Both of them returned his look of speechless realization.

"What?" Wentworth said, frowning. "You three look like somebody just shot Freezing Charms into your underpants."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" James asked quietly.

Zane nodded. "I'm thinking I bet I know who the mysterious patron is that 'borrowed' the old lucky horseshoe."

"But how would Magnussen have figured it all out?" Ralph asked. "We've got the portrait to explain everything, but Magnussen didn't get anything from him, apparently."

"Magnussen wouldn't have *needed* anyone to explain it!" James whispered, flush with excitement. "Remember what Franklyn told us? Magnussen was a guy who loved stories! He'd probably already read all about the legend of the Rider!"

Zane nodded. "Then, later, when he's out prowling the halls here in the castle, he spies these tapestries and starts putting everything together. He connects the tapestries with the silver horseshoe up in the Tower of Art and bambo, he's got the dimensional key he's been dreaming of all along!"

"Wow," Ralph laughed a little nervously. "So the riddle was right after all. The truth walked the halls of Erebus Castle, right here. The truth was *Magnussen* and the *tapestries* put together!"

There was a long meaningful pause as the three boys stared at one another, absorbing the gravity of what they had just discovered. Finally, Wentworth spoke up, breaking the silence.

"Well, this is all marvelous," he sighed, rolling his eyes and pulling James by the elbow. "I don't know what any of it means or why I should care, but bully for all three of you. Now, can I maybe go back and finish my lunch?"



18. THE DIMENSIONAL KEY

The first hints of spring on the campus of Alma Aleron were marked by a series of very gusty days. The warm winds first melted the remaining patches of snow and then dried the winter-yellow lawns so that by the week before Valentine's Day, groups of students could be seen practicing skirmish or tossing Clutches over the mall's yards and empty flowerbeds. After nearly a week of grey days, the sun finally broke through a tatter of stubborn clouds, bathing Administration Hall with beams of shifting golden light.

In the days after the revelation of the Erebus Castle tapestries, James, Ralph, and Zane had begun to plan the next step of their adventure, which was to somehow use the time-traveling nature of the school to go back to the date of Professor Magnussen's escape and follow him through the Timelock, out into Muggle Philadelphia. There, they would attempt to nick the dimensional key—the unicorn's silver horseshoe—from the villain professor before he could use it to vanish forever through the Nexus Curtain.

"If we're lucky," Zane whispered one morning in Clockwork Mechanics as Professor Cloverhoof assisted another student with her magical cuckoo clock, "we'll get the horseshoe *and* see where the Nexus Curtain is at the same time."

James lurched suddenly backward as his own wooden cuckoo bird sprang from the tiny doors of his half-finished clock. The bird extended on a complicated accordion of wooden struts, began to retract back, and then lurched to a squeaking halt, bobbing back and forth over James' shoulder.

"Not enough beeswax on the joints," the bird chirped in irritation. "And your measurements are all over the place."

"Shut it, bird," James grumped, reaching to force it back into its compartment. To Zane, he whispered, "You mean if we just follow Magnussen without being seen, we can wait for him to lead us to the Nexus Curtain and then try to nick the unicorn's shoe before he actually uses it?"

"Seems like it'd be cutting things a bit close," Ralph admitted.

"Yeah," his own cuckoo bird chirped from where it lay on the table next to him, surrounded by a variety of wooden cogs, tools, and brass gears. "And finesse doesn't seem to be ya all's strong suit."

"Shut it, bird," all three boys said in unison.

Just to be sure of their information, James had suggested that they take a quick trip up to the museum atop the Tower of Art to learn what they could about the unicorn's horseshoe. During their Wednesday afternoon free period, they climbed the hundreds of stairs to the top of the Tower and spent some time wandering the museum's halls, searching for any information about the apparently missing horseshoe. The curator was not at her desk, unfortunately, and a quick look around the museum's halls revealed no mysteriously vacant display cases or empty frames where the horseshoe might originally have been displayed.

"It's been gone too long," Zane insisted, bored. "The portrait said they didn't even really know the significance of the thing anyway, remember? As far as the curator knew, it was just some silver horseshoe from the Erebus family collection. Totally old and stuff, but still, just a horseshoe. Once it went missing, they probably just closed the display and put in a new bowl of golden scarabs. Let's go back and see them again, now that I mention it. I still have some of those copper shavings in my pocket that they like to eat."

"We need to be sure," James said stubbornly. "Erebus himself said he's pretty fuzzy on anything that's happened since his death. I want to know for certain that the horseshoe really was here once and that it went missing around Magnussen's time. Hold on..."

"What?" Ralph asked as James suddenly pulled him into a side corridor. "You see something?"

"These are just more portraits," Zane said, rolling his eyes. "You going to corroborate one half-baked heap of paint with another?"

"If their stories agree, then yes," James replied. "Besides, I've heard that one of these guys was known for never telling a lie."

"A quote that has long outlived its context," one of the portraits said with a sniff. "It was directed at Mrs. Washington, in fact, on the occasion of a missing slice of apple pie. And, I might add, it was meant to be rather sarcastic."

"George Washington?" Ralph asked, peering at the large portrait on the corridor wall. "What's he going to know about a magical unicorn horseshoe?"

"Nothing whatsoever with an attitude like that, young man," Washington answered huffily. "I've been watching the three of you traipse around the museum. I can't imagine why you haven't already asked any of us portraits about whatever it is you are seeking, especially since the curator is absent. *Not* that said absence is at all unusual."

"That's for certain," another portrait added. James glanced up and saw the painted visage of a rather round-faced man with tufts of iron grey hair poking from the sides of his head. '*John Adams*', the name plate read. "Our Madam Curator spends about as much time at her post as a Virginia night watchman."

"I take offense at comments like that," another portrait commented from further down the hall.

"We *know*, Thomas," Washington said with a roll of his eyes. "That's why Adams keeps making them. He's been trying to get your goat for centuries. I cannot understand why you keep making it so very easy for him."

"Like shooting fish in a barrel," Adams smirked.

"Some of us prefer more *sporting* contests," said the portrait from further down the hall. James leaned to the side and read the name plate: '*Thomas Jefferson*'. "Us Virginians aim for loftier challenges than mere colloquial insults."

"Do note, John," Washington added carefully, "that I was a Virginian as well."

"Yes, but you can give as well as you get, George," Adams replied jovially. "You have a sense of humour, after all."

"Wait a minute," Ralph interrupted. "George Washington. You're the guy that invented peanut butter, right?"

"Ahem," another voice coughed lightly. "You're thinking of George Washington *Carver*, young man. A common enough mistake, I suppose."

"Oh," Ralph said, his face reddening as he glanced aside at the portrait of a handsome man with dark skin and grey hair. "Er, sorry, Mr. Carver."

"Not necessary," the portrait smiled. "Although do spread the word, if you will pardon the pun: I invented over four hundred uses for the common peanut. Being chiefly remembered for the creation of a snack food tends to be a bit of a legacy killer."

Ralph nodded. "I'll, er, try to remember that, sir."

"So then," Adams said, leaning back in his painted chair, "what can we do for you fine gentlemen?"

Zane stepped forward. "All right," he said, glancing around at the portraits. "We're looking for information about something that might have been here in the museum a long time ago. Any of you guys remember a silver horseshoe?"

"Silver horseshoe," Washington mused thoughtfully. "Rings a very faint bell, I daresay, although the idea seems a bit impractical on the surface of it."

"You may wish to ask Miss Sacajawea," Jefferson suggested. "She has a better view of the rest of the museum, being on the end near the entryway."

James walked along the line of portraits until he came to a large painting of a tall Native American woman in a fringed, buff-coloured tunic. Her long black hair fell over one shoulder, glinting in the light of a forest sunset.

"Um," James began, "hi, Miss. Mr. Jefferson said you might know something about an old horseshoe that used to be here in the museum. Do you remember anything like that?"

The woman in the portrait didn't move for several seconds. Finally, her eyelids fluttered slightly, as if she were rousing herself from a sort of sleep. She glanced at James solemnly and then nodded past him toward the corridor's broad entrance. "The talisman of the Rider's mount," she said softly. "I remember it. Its voice once sang from the hall beyond you, from its resting place near the window."

Zane frowned. "Er, I don't think we're talking about the same thing," he said respectfully. "This was a *silver horseshoe*. You know. Not the sort of thing that sings, usually."

"It was no usual relic," the portrait said, and there was a tinge of sadness in her voice. "Its home was not of this world and the hoof from which it came belonged to no ordinary beast. Its voice was tiny, nearly faded to silence, but such was the enchantment of its origin that it still told its sad tale even after so many seasons had passed over it. I alone heard its song and marked its passing."

In an awed voice, James asked, "Do you remember what happened to it, Miss?"

Sacajawea nodded slowly. "The man with the iron cane took it," she said. "He enchanted the woman who was curator in that time, making her believe that he had been given special privileges. She helped him unlock the talisman's case. When the man touched the talisman, its song, faint as it was, finally ceased. He took it with him and it has been gone ever since."

"The man with the iron cane," Zane whispered, nudging James. "Magnussen, you think?"

James nodded. "Who else could it be?"

"Ignatius Magnussen," Jefferson's voice echoed from the corridor. "I remember him—and his cane."

James looked back. "You saw him here too?"

"He was not the sort of man one is likely to forget," Jefferson answered soberly. "Had a face like something carved from granite and a tongue like a two-edged sword."

"We observed him with his classes, on occasion," Washington added. "Thomas is quite right. Professor Magnussen had a way with cruelty that was very nearly an art form. I knew men like him in my day, men whose words could both build the strongest confidences and cut the deepest wounds."

"And his iron-tipped cane, I might add," said the portrait of George Washington Carver, "was no normal cane. Its power was concealed, but no great secret. Where others seem to rely on magical wands, Professor Magnussen wielded his horrid cane, and it was revered with much dread."

"I remember seeing that cane," James said thoughtfully. "In the Disrecorder vision. It was leaning against the table, right next to him. Its handle looked sort of like a falcon or a gargoyle or something."

"Indeed, that was the man's constant companion," the portrait of Adams said, nodding. "Be glad, gentlemen, that his day is past and you do not have to sit beneath his cold eye."

"Yeah," Ralph said morosely as they made their way back along the corridor, heading for the exit. "Hooray for us."



It was Valentine's evening before the three boys were finally able to attempt the trip through time in pursuit of the infamous Professor Magnussen. Tracking down the date of the professor's disappearance was the easiest part since, by all accounts, it coincided with the fire that destroyed his erstwhile home. Figuring out how to get the Warping Willow to take them to that exact date, however, proved to be a bit more of a challenge. In the end, Zane had called upon his fellow Zombies, including Warrington, to help write the appropriate rhyming verse that would, with any luck, send them back to the evening of October eighth, eighteen fifty-nine.

The day leading up to the adventure went exceedingly slowly. James found it very difficult to pay attention in Georgia Burke's Magizoology class even though they were studying live Velocipedes, which tended to require constant observation and very quick reflexes. Halfway through the class, James had gotten neatly bowled over by one of the huge hundred-legged insects. As a result, the creature had squirmed playfully around him in a vigorous hug and licked his face repeatedly with its long prehensile tongue.

"You'll be all right," Professor Burke called from outside the muddy pen. "They're like big puppies, really. Just relax and she'll get bored with you in a minute. There's no point in trying to disengage yourself, trust me."

James flopped back into the mud and squinted his eyes shut while the Velocipede huffed excitedly into his face, its tongue like a miniature, rubbery whip.

The afternoon's classes had no sooner ended than James had to rush across campus toward Pepperpock Down, munching a sandwich en route and dragging his Clutch gear along with him. The afternoon match was against Pixie House, and amazingly enough, Team Bigfoot was tied with the Pixies' scoring record. Frankly, James was too preoccupied with the evening's upcoming adventure to care much about the match, but the rest of Team Bigfoot had been wildly heartened by their recent victory over Team Vampire. As a result, they went into that afternoon's match with a grim determination that was, despite James' distraction, quite inspiring. It was no great surprise, therefore, when the Bigfoots prevailed narrowly throughout the match and ended the game with a very slim but breathlessly exciting win over the Pixies. The packed grandstands roared raucously when the final whistle blew, and James realized with some degree of amazement that Team Bigfoot had gone from forgettable losers to admirable underdogs. The entire school (with the obvious exception of whichever house they happened to be playing) suddenly seemed to be rooting for them, if only as a novelty.

Changing out of his Clutch gear and heading for Administration Hall for dinner, James met up with Zane and Ralph. It wasn't until they made their way toward the cafeteria that James remembered that it was the night of the Valentine's dance. Construction paper hearts and cupids flitted through the upper reaches of the halls, occasionally swooping down onto unsuspecting students and chasing them around, producing sudden explosions of giggles and happy screams.

"What's all that about?" James asked as a girl swept past, giggling and batting at the paper cupid that was circling her head.

"It's Valentine's Day," Zane shrugged. "Don't you have Valentine's Day at Hoggies?"

"Yeah," Ralph nodded. "I guess. But it's a lot less, er, screamy."

Zane rolled his eyes as he ducked into the cafeteria. "It's simple, really. If one of the cupids or hearts lands on you, you have to go and find a girl who's got one of the hearts or cupids stuck on *her*. You kiss and then the cupids and hearts let you go."

"Ah," Ralph said uncomfortably. "Maybe we should have just had dinner back at Apollo Mansion."

"Buck up, Ralph," James smiled, nudging the bigger boy. "If you play your cards right, you could winkle a kiss out of Jazmine."

Ralph boggled and his face reddened. "You think so? No. That's..." He stopped as the idea firmly began to take root in his mind. His eyes began to dart around the room, watching the flitting paper symbols.

"It's all about timing," Zane nodded, throwing an arm around Ralph's shoulders. "Keep your head down until one of them nabs Jazmine. Then up you pop. Obvious, but not *too* obvious, you know? Those cupids can smell opportunists, so you have to play it cool."

James stopped listening as he filled his tray. Half a minute later, the three boys found a seat at one of the long, crowded tables. The cafeteria thrummed with the noise of the post-Clutch, pre-dance crowd, creating an atmosphere of giddy excitement that very nearly vibrated in the walls.

"You all set for tonight?" Zane asked James as he munched a grilled cheese sandwich.

"I guess," James shrugged. "I've been going over it all day in my head. The sooner we get it over with, the better."

"I went out to see old Straithwait in the cemetery again," Zane said quietly. "Just to make sure we had everything all buttoned up. He said he saw Magnussen leave around eight o'clock on the night of the fire. If we get this right, we'll arrive at the walled gate about half an hour before him. Then, we can just hide out and follow him when he shows up."

"What about Flintlock?" James asked suddenly. "Won't he recognize that we aren't students in that time? What if he thinks we're intruders or something?"

"Funny thing about rock trolls," Zane smiled, tapping his nose. "They don't occupy time the same way we do. Did you know that when they're born, they actually age *backward*? They get younger as time passes! It's true. Rose looked it up for me at the Hogwarts library. She's like our own private research department, you know?"

"What do you mean they age backwards?" James frowned. "You mean Flintlock's younger now than he was when he first came to America hundreds of years ago?"

Zane shrugged and bobbed his head. "Hard to say. A lot of trolls try to *learn* to age forward in time like we do, especially if they live and work with humans. When in Rome, you know? The point is Flintlock's grasp on time is pretty slippery. Even in eighteen fifty-nine, he'll sort of remember us from the present day."

"That's totally bizarre," Ralph said around a mouthful of Jell-O.

"Yeah," Zane agreed. "But the upshot is that even if he does eventually realize we aren't supposed to be around in that time, we'll probably already be long gone, chasing after old Iggy Magnussen."

James drew a breath to respond when something fluttered wildly in his ear, startling him. "What is it!?" he cried, batting at the side of his head. "Get it off!"

"Calm down," Zane laughed. "It's a red cupid. You've been marked, James. Better go find somebody to kiss."

James stopped flailing. The paper cupid flung a red and pink paper chain around his neck and held on tight.

"What?" James exclaimed, trying to peer down at the figure on his shoulder. "No way. I don't have a girlfriend or anything."

"That's the point," Zane insisted, pushing him up from the table. "This is how you *get* a girlfriend."

James' face reddened. "But I don't need any help in that area!"

Ralph shrugged and grinned. "Cupid disagrees."

"What happens if I just rip it off me?"

Zane shook his head warningly. "You can't break the spell that way, mate. They may be paper, but they're *stubborn*. In five minutes, he'll start pulling your hair out one strand at a time. After that, things will get ugly."

James shook his head in irritation and embarrassment, allowing Zane to push him up from his seat. Glancing around the room, he saw several girls with pink hearts and cupids clinging variously to their hair, collars, and necks. He immediately looked away from them, refusing to make eye contact.

"Ohh," Zane encouraged. "Julie Margoliss has a pink heart! She's a senior! *She* could teach you a thing or two about kissing. Go for it!"

"No!" James hissed. He angled out from between the tables, keeping his eyes lowered. He tugged at the cupid, but it only renewed its grip on the paper chain around his neck. "We'll see how you like a little hot water splashed on your chain, you little imp," he warned, stalking toward the bathroom head down. "Just try to hang onto me when you're soggy as a—"

He stopped suddenly as he ran into someone else, nearly knocking them both to the ground.

"James!" a girl's voice said, surprised, and James groaned inwardly.

"Er, hi Lu," he said, the blush on his face deepening from pink to brick red. "Sorry. Didn't see you."

"Me neither," she admitted, glancing away and tugging at her shoulder. A red heart was stuck there, apparently by some sort of magical magnetism. "I was just on my way to, er..."

James saw the look of miserable embarrassment on his cousin's face, saw her eyes as she refused to look at him.

"Hey Lu," he said quietly, and she finally looked up at him. He took a quick breath and went on. "Sorry about the other day. I was a total berk. I should have just asked you straight up for what I needed. Can you forgive me?"

She studied his eyes for a moment and then slumped slightly. "I forgave you that very night," she admitted shyly. "I can't stay mad at you, no matter how hard I want to. And I really *did* want to."

James glanced around the room to make sure no one was watching and then leaned close to the shorter girl. "I *wasn't* trying to trick you when I asked you to go to the Halloween Dance with me, Lu," he said earnestly. "I asked you because I knew I'd have fun with you, and I *did*. You had fun too, right? I didn't mean for it to be... er... confusing."

Lucy shook her head and dropped her eyes. "Don't say any more, James. I'm already mortified. Just let me sneak off to the girls' bathroom and see if I can soak this stupid heart off of me."

James smiled sheepishly. "I was going to do the same thing," he admitted. "I mean, not in the girls' bathroom, though, of course. I was going to... um..." He paused, looking down at her as

a completely unexpected idea occurred to him. It was probably stupid, but suddenly that didn't seem to matter very much.

"Er," he began, and she glanced up at him. Her eyes were huge and very dark, cautiously inquisitive. "Er," he said again, and swallowed. "I mean, I know we're cousins and all, but we're not really *blood* or anything, like. We could maybe just..."

But suddenly Lucy was pulled away, caught up in a mass of students who pushed past, screaming and laughing.

"You lost your chance with *this* little Vampire, Potter," Gobbins grinned, taking Lucy by the shoulder. "You snooze, you lose!"

With a quick messy *smack*, he kissed Lucy on the corner of her mouth. Immediately, the paper heart flitted up from her shoulder and darted out over the cafeteria. Lucy touched the corner of her mouth, simultaneously peeved and amused.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Lucy!" Gobbins called with a grin as he backed away. Lucy blushed and smiled, a little flustered.

James sighed deeply, his face heating. "Yeah," he agreed somberly. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Before Lucy could reply, he ducked into the boys' bathroom, tugging at the cupid that still clung to his neck.



"I *told* you you couldn't just rip it off," Zane whispered some hours later as the three boys stole through the darkness toward the Warping Willow.

"Don't remind me!" James rasped. "Let's just forget the whole thing ever happened, all right?"

"It's a good thing for you that Mother Newt saw you in the hall and knew how to summon a paper heart for herself," Zane said, shaking his head. "Otherwise, you'd probably be spear bald by now. So, was she a good kisser, then?"

James fumed silently.

"I hear she was quite a looker back in the day," Ralph mused.

Zane considered this. “*Waaay* back in the day, maybe.”

“*Would you both shut up about it?*” James exclaimed in a loud hiss. “We’re nearly there. You got the note?”

“Right here,” Zane acknowledged, producing a folded scrap of parchment from his pocket. “Here’s hoping it works.”

Silently, the boys crept underneath the low-hanging limbs of the Warping Willow. All around, the campus was dark and quiet, overhung by a huge moon and a sprinkle of glittering stars.

“I think you’re supposed to read it first,” Ralph said, nudging Zane. “And then you drop it in the knothole in the trunk.”

“I know, I know,” Zane mumbled. “All right, here goes.”

The blonde boy unfolded the note and peered at it by the dim light of the moon. He took a deep breath and read aloud: “Warping Willow, take we three... to a date that’s nifty-fine... in the nineteenth century... eighth October, fifty-nine.”

Rolling his eyes, Zane crumpled the note and dropped it into the hole in the Willow’s trunk.

“Nifty-fine?” Ralph repeated quizzically.

“Hey, *you* try to find a rhyme for fifty-nine,” Zane replied tersely. “See what *you* come up with.”

“Do you think it’ll work?” James asked, looking around.

As if in answer, the Tree’s limbs began to sway and whisper all around. Very slowly, the stars beyond the Tree’s canopy began to move like painted dots on a monstrous black dome.

“We’re going *somewhere*, at least,” Zane said. “Let’s hope we got everything right and don’t end up in the Stone Age or something.”

“You’re joking, right?” Ralph asked nervously. Neither Zane nor James replied.

Accompanied by the shushing movement of the Willow’s limbs, time began to unravel all around. Night crept backwards into day only to be followed swiftly by night once again. The sun and moon chased each other faster and faster through the sky, becoming streaks as the days grew into a flickering blur. Winter came and went again and then the leaves sprang up onto the trees all around, changing from autumn orange to vibrant summer green. Seasons melted together as years sped into decades, spiraling steadily backwards. Finally, the whip-like branches of the Warping Willow began to relax. The whicker of the leaves settled to a whisper as the sun resolved into an individual orb again, dropping past the horizon, descending into a single chilly night. The moon crept up into the sky, a thin sickle shape now, and stopped.

“Well,” Zane said, his voice unconsciously hushed, “we’re here. I hope.”

“How do we know what year it is?” James asked as they skulked out from beneath the Tree into the weedy walled yard that formed the entrance to Muggle Philadelphia. “Do we just wait and hope for the best?”

Ralph nodded. "I don't think we have much of a choice. Are you sure about the incantation that takes us back to the school?"

"That one's easy," Zane whispered. "I've heard it about a thousand times and it never really changes, so long as you know the timeframe that the Aleron is occupying on any given day. Warrington worked it out with me, so that's no problem."

"Shh!" James rasped suddenly, pushing Ralph and Zane backwards behind him. He nodded toward the gate and whispered, "Look!"

Both boys looked and saw the hunkered shape of Flintlock. He was in his resting form, looking like nothing more than a pile of great mossy boulders near the closed gate. As they watched, a clatter of hooves on cobbles could be heard beyond the gate. A shadow passed by on the street outside followed by a rattle of wheels.

"Well," Ralph whispered, "horses and carriages. That's a good sign, I guess."

James nodded. Together, the three boys hunkered down into the weeds near the yard's furthest corner.

As they waited, the sounds of the Muggle city filled the small yard, echoing off the stone walls. James heard indistinct voices and laughter as well as the more distant bellows of working men, probably down by the river. Clangs and whistles marked the passage of ships on the dark waterway. The crisp breeze carried the scent of smoke, horse manure, and rotting fish. After a few minutes, a bell began to toll the hour, ringing clearly in the darkness. Eight chimes pealed out, diminishing slowly into the silence.

"Any moment now," Zane whispered, watching the Warping Willow carefully.

"I hope he comes quick-like," Ralph replied quietly. "My bum's going to sleep."

Several more minutes crept by, each one seeming as long as an hour. James began to worry that they had missed their target date somehow. He opened his mouth to say so when the Tree began to rustle faintly in front of them.

"This is it," Zane rasped, his eyes bulging with anticipation. "Keep low so he doesn't see us!"

James hunkered down in the weeds, hoping the darkness and the overgrowth would be enough to hide them. Shortly, the motion of the Tree increased, hiding the space beneath it. James held his breath, watching. With a shudder and a sort of sigh, the limbs relaxed, and a figure stepped purposely out from beneath the Willow.

There was no question of who the figure was. Even in the darkness, the fringe of short grey hair and the chiseled features of Ignatius Magnussen were clearly visible. Further dispelling any doubt, the man thumped the ground with his cane and James saw moonlight glinting off the hooked iron face of its handle.

"Awake, my friend," Magnussen announced in his unmistakable British accent, speaking to Flintlock. "I have one final duty to perform this evening and then you will know me no more."

Slowly, Flintlock stirred, his movements like a miniature landslide in reverse. "Professor," the troll said, spying the man before him, "I'm afraid I cannot allow you to pass. I have orders directly from Chancellor Franklyn himself."

Magnussen lowered his head and stepped forward in a friendly fashion. "I am quite certain that you do, my friend," he said. "But look here..."

With that, Magnussen raised his cane, holding the iron head aloft, nearly at the troll's eye-level. A green flash lit the troll's face, sparkling in his diamond chip eyes, and Flintlock stopped moving.

"Open the gate," Magnussen ordered, and all the friendliness had dropped out of his voice. "Or I will unmake you and return you to the guts of the earth, a million pebbles without memory of the shape they once comprised."

Jerkily, almost as if he were being operated by a careless puppet-master, Flintlock reached for the gate. He wrenched it open in one swift motion, ripping the vines that had grown up through the bars.

"Thank you, my friend," Magnussen said easily, lowering his cane. With a sweep of his cloak, he strode through the entrance and disappeared into the dark street beyond.

"That was an Imperius Curse," Zane breathed worriedly. "He *Imperioed* Flintlock!"

"Come on!" James whispered, scrambling to his feet.

"But what about Flintlock?" Ralph asked. "What if he tries to stop us?"

Zane approached the great stony troll carefully and then patted him on the knee. "I don't think he's going to notice anything for awhile," he said with a shudder.

James looked up at the troll as he passed. Flintlock's eyes stared straight ahead, glinting dully in the moonlight. More than anything, he looked like a machine that had been temporarily switched off.

"Come on," Zane nodded soberly. "Mags went to the right. We have to hurry up or we'll lose sight of him."

With a renewed sense of urgency, the three boys darted through the open doorway out into the streets of nineteenth century Muggle Philadelphia.



To James' eye, Muggle Philadelphia didn't look immediately very different despite the change of nearly two centuries.

The streets were narrower and cobbled rather than paved and the footpaths were made of uneven slabs of stone, leaning somewhat drunkenly toward the brick-lined gutters. What streetlamps there were flickered with gas flames instead of the bright incandescence of the modern lights. The houses that lined the streets, however, seemed nearly unchanged, apart from the lack of any televisions flashing behind the windows. Occasionally, a black carriage or hansom cab would trundle past in the tow of large horses, their eyes hidden behind black blinders, their harnesses creaking and jingling.

"This would be a lot easier if there were more people on the street," Ralph whispered as they trailed Magnussen. "If he turns around, he'll see us straight away."

"Just walk casual," Zane muttered, "and try to keep in the shadows."

Magnussen strode briskly, his cape billowing behind him like bat wings in the chilly breeze. The three boys had to occasionally trot to keep him in sight as he zigzagged through the narrow residential streets. Obviously, Magnussen knew exactly where he was going and was sparing no time in getting there. Shortly, the boys trailed the big man into a neighborhood of much larger houses, most surrounded by low stone walls and wrought-iron gates. The gas lampposts were more prominent here and the windows of the houses glowed brightly, making it harder for the three boys to stay hidden in shadows. Magnussen never once looked back, however, even as he turned sharply and descended into a narrow alley.

"We're heading down toward the river," Zane whispered as they ducked into the alley. "Wrong-side-of-the-tracks-city."

"What's that mean?" Ralph asked. "I didn't see any tracks."

"It means keep a sharp eye out, Ralphinator," Zane said grimly. "This area is seedy enough in our own day. I don't expect it's any better in this timeframe. Watch your back."

Fortunately, it was much easier for the boys to follow Magnussen here since the streets were very narrow and crowded with carts, uneven stacks of crates and barrels, and parked carriages. Figures moved in the dim recesses of doorways or skulked along the cobbled road, their feet splashing in the puddles that trickled downhill toward the river beyond. James realized that they had gotten close enough to Magnussen to hear his boot heels knocking hollowly on the cobbles.

"How far's he going to go?" Zane whispered, darting behind a row of empty carts. "We're nearly to the waterfront. Those're the wharves up ahead. After that, there's nothing but river."

Suddenly, Magnussen stopped and turned around. James ducked behind the nearest cart, his heart leaping up into his throat. Both Ralph and Zane hunkered down next to him. After a long, tense moment, the three dared to peek out from beneath the cart, their chins virtually touching the wet street.

Magnussen was fingering his cane as he peered around the cramped intersection, his eyes narrowed. Finally, apparently satisfied, he turned and stalked into an even narrower alley.

"That looks like a dead end," James whispered. "Doesn't it?"

Zane nodded. "Come on, we can get closer if we hide behind that pile of broken crates."

As quietly as possible, the three boys crept along the edge of the street into the shadow of the jagged pile. Bits of broken wood crunched underfoot as the three gathered against the corner of a brick warehouse.

"It *is* a dead end," Ralph whispered, peering cautiously around the corner. "There's a little stairway at the end, though, and a door. Looks like a cheap little flat or something."

Zane craned his head around the corner as well, squinting in the darkness. "Any sign of old Mags?"

"No," Ralph shook his head. "He must have gone inside. You think maybe it's *his* flat? Like, he rented it special just to have a place outside of school?"

James nodded. "He needed a place to hide the horseshoe, where nobody magical would sense its power. While it was up in the museum, it was probably lost in the background noise of all the other magical relics up there. Once he took it out, though, he'd need to keep it hidden. This is probably the perfect place."

"So," Ralph whispered, turning back around and leaning against the grimy bricks, "how are we going to get the horseshoe from him?"

Zane rubbed his hands together against the cold. "Right. What's the plan, James?"

"Me?" James rasped. "I thought *you* were in charge of that detail?"

"*I* got the verse to get us through the Warping Willow!" Zane frowned defensively.

Ralph glanced worriedly from Zane to James. "And, er, *I'm* the one what found old zombie Professor Straidthwait! Without him, we wouldn't have gotten anywhere at all!"

"Hold on," James said, poking a finger into the air. "We got this far and *none* of us has any plan for how to actually *get* the unicorn's horseshoe from Magnussen?"

"Well," Zane shrugged, "we could just send Ralph out there with his Godzilla wand. I'd put your wand up against that evil cane of his any day, Ralphinator."

"No way I'm dueling a bloke like that," Ralph replied, shaking his head vigorously. "Not after the way all those portraits talked about him. Let's not forget that the man's a bloody murderer!"

James nodded soberly. "That's true. We have to be dead careful."

"Or just plain dead," Zane gulped.

"Don't get spooked yet," James said reasonably. "We still need to follow him to the Nexus Curtain. We can figure something out along the way."

"Yeah," Zane nodded. "Figuring stuff out along the way, that's always worked out great for us in the past."

"Shh!" Ralph hissed, peering back around the corner. "Here he comes!"

A door thunked shut in the darkness and was followed by the tromp of boots on squeaky stairs. James peeked around the corner, followed by Zane. Together, the three boys watched the shadowy form of Professor Magnussen as he stalked along the alley, his feet splashing in the puddles and his cane glinting in the darkness.

"Hey," a man's voice called out suddenly. James startled, as did Zane and Ralph. Magnussen stopped in his tracks, wary as a jackal. After a few tense seconds, the voice spoke again, timidly, but with stubborn resolution.

"She knew you'd come back," it said, and there was a hint of a disbelieving laugh in it. "I told her she was crazy. You'd never come back here, not after what happened. But here you are, bold as brass, big as life."

Magnussen hadn't moved. His voice came out of the darkness silkily. "You have me at a disadvantage, friend," he said. "Come into the light so I can see you."

"What, so you can do to me what you did to her?" the voice scoffed nervously. In spite of its words, however, a figure moved into the mouth of the alley. He was a young man, barely twenty years old, very thin and wearing a bowler's hat. Braces were slung over his shoulders, holding up a pair of ill-fitting flannel pants. He was less than fifteen feet away from James, Zane, and Ralph where they hid in the shadow of the broken crates.

"Have we met, good sir?" Magnussen asked calmly, taking a step forward.

"Oh yes, we've met," the man spat. "Although I doubt you'd remember it. Fredericka even talked to you about me. She was worried that you might get the wrong ideas about her, a big fancy man like you from up in the Heights coming down here to engage the services of a common seamstress. I heard all about how you stared at her when she delivered your mended coats and capes, how you looked like you were measuring her up with your eyes, like she was just a piece of meat and you were a butcher. She told you she had a fiancé just so you knew where you stood with her. To me, she said not to worry, that she could handle herself and she needed the money you were payin' her. But turns out she was right about you, wasn't she? Poor little Fredericka who never would've hurt a fly. You *were* a butcher after all. You killed her, *mangled* her, and left her in the street for us to find. And now here you are, come right back to the very scene, just as bold as you please."

"This is a misunderstanding, my good man," Magnussen said soothingly, still stepping forward. To James, he looked like a cat slowly creeping up on its prey. Silently, James drew his wand from his pocket. Next to him, he sensed Ralph and Zane doing the same.

"Helen said you'd come back," the man said, and then he laughed a little hysterically. At his side, he held a length of iron, a crowbar. "Helen is Fredericka's little sister, you know. She has a sense about these things. I didn't believe her, at least not completely. But you know what? I believed her enough to keep a watch on this here alley. When I saw you come here tonight, saw you

stand right here on this spot, looking around like you owned the place, I barely believed my own eyes. But Helen was right. You came back."

The man began to stride forward then, raising the crowbar. He looked like he barely knew what he meant to do with it.

Magnussen didn't move. "Now look here, my good man," he said with a smile in his voice.

Suddenly, the thin man flew up from the pavement, flailing wildly in the air and dropping the crowbar. It clattered loudly to the cobbles, spinning away into a puddle. A moment later, the man himself crashed into a stack of barrels at the rear of the alley. The barrels toppled and tumbled over each other, burying the man.

"So much ugliness," Magnussen sighed to himself, turning toward the rear of the alley. "When will these people ever learn..."

A barrel clattered sideways as the skinny man scrambled to his feet again, his face pale but determined in the dimness. "I don't know *who* or *what* you are, you demon," he breathed, "but you aren't leaving this alley. For Fredericka..."

"You know," Magnussen said magnanimously, "the young lady *did* speak of you, now that you mention it. Your name is William, isn't it? Yes. She screamed your name, in fact, near the end of her life. I wouldn't have thought that she'd been capable of something so strenuous at that point, but that just goes to show the difference between theory and reality. It was highly instructive, in fact. I'll tell you what. As thanks, I will grant you your greatest wish. I will send you to join your dear departed Fredericka. Perhaps you will scream *her* name as well."

The skinny man barely seemed to hear Magnussen. He lurched to his feet, limping pathetically, and began to lopé toward the older man, his bare hands held before him, hooked into claws. In the darkness, Magnussen raised his cane, smiling malevolently.

"No!" James cried out, leaping out into the alley and brandishing his wand. His voice, however, was drowned out by a loud, echoing *crack*, nearly deafening in the confined space of the alley.

Too late! James thought hectically, still aiming his wand wildly at Magnussen's back. *He's killed him!* The skinny man, William, did not fall, however. James blinked into the darkness of the alley, waiting for Magnussen's evil spell to take effect. Instead, Magnussen lowered his cane and then dropped it. It clattered to the alley. A moment later, Magnussen himself fell to his knees.

"How...," he asked, looking up at William. Slowly, almost ponderously, Magnussen fell forward, flat on his face in the center of the alley, dead.

"For Fredericka," a girl's voice said faintly. James looked to the side. A young woman, barely older than James himself, stood nearby. She stared at Magnussen's dead body, her face a mask of pale resignation. In her outstretched hand, smoking lazily, was a small pistol.

"For Fredericka," she repeated faintly, "from her fiancé, William. And from me, her sister. Helen."



The girl, Helen, had seen the three boys, but didn't seem particularly interested in them. Zane, being wise enough to opt for the truth when it was most appropriate, simply told her that the dead man in the alley had stolen something from their school, thus he and his friends had followed him in the hopes of getting it back.

William, still limping, had been surprised to see Helen and her pistol, but only a little. Kneeling over the body of Magnussen, he had retrieved the man's evil magical cane. With a swift, decisive movement, he broke the cane over his knee. The long end he tossed into the gutter, but the handle he peered at in his hand, studying the glint of moonlight on the leering metal face. He shuddered.

"Your stolen goods might not be the sort of thing that would fit in a velvet bag, would they?" he asked dourly, looking down at the body.

James nodded. "Could be," he answered, stepping gingerly forward. As he approached Magnussen's prone figure, he saw a drawstring sack lying next to the corpse, still hooked over the left wrist. Feeling a wave of revulsion, James tugged the loop of string from around the dead man's wrist. The hand thumped back to the street with a faint smack.

"You three..." William said faintly, looking at the boys. "You're like *him*, ain't you?"

James swallowed thickly and shook his head, but Ralph, surprisingly, was the one to speak up. "We're sorry for what happened to Fredericka," he said solemnly. "This man may have been a part of our world... but we aren't like him."

William stared at Ralph, his eyes wide and shining in the darkness. Slowly, he nodded. Helen moved next to him and put an arm around his shoulders, still staring down at Magnussen's body, as if mesmerized by it. Her face was very pale and James had a suspicion that the girl had been sick only moments earlier, probably behind the same broken crates where he, Zane, and Ralph had hidden.

"I don't know what's in that velvet bag," William said, shuddering, "and I'm sure I don't want to. This is over. You go your way. And me and Helen, we'll try to go ours. Fair enough?"

James nodded. He could feel the cold weight of the horseshoe through the velvet of the sack. Slowly, he backed away from the body of Magnussen. Zane and Ralph followed and a moment later, all three boys turned and ran out of the alley. They ran almost the entire way back to the Alma Aleron gate, where Flintlock was only just beginning to come out of the trance Magnussen had cast over him. The rock troll remembered them in that hazy reverse-time way that Zane had predicted and allowed them to approach the Warping Willow. Zane recited the incantation that would return them to the school and the Tree began to shiver all around them. The moon and stars started to roll forward again, taking them back to the school and their own time.

Throughout the journey home, James held the velvet bag, fingering the distinctive shape inside it. Neither he, Zane, nor Ralph said a word.

They didn't have to.



19. UNHELPFUL REVELATIONS

"They *killed* him?" Rose asked the following day, speaking through the Shard on the back of the dormitory room door. "Shot him dead, right there in the street?"

"It was like something from a movie," Ralph nodded soberly. "Only in real life, it doesn't feel so exciting. It was just sad and shocking and... sort of final. It didn't *fix* anything that'd been done. It just stopped more bad things from happening."

"The poor girl," Rose said sadly, shaking her head. "Maybe Magnussen deserved what he got, but she'll have to live with what she did for the rest of her life. That's what courts of law are for."

"Boohoo," Scorpius scoffed, sitting on the other end of the sofa in the Gryffindor common room. "You think some Muggle court would be able to capture and convict someone like Magnussen? Don't kid yourself. I'm more interested in the horseshoe anyway. Let us see it, why don't you?"

James swallowed hard and turned toward his bunk. A moment later, he retrieved the black velvet bag from beneath his mattress.

"We haven't found a decent hiding place for it yet," he said, loosening the drawstring and sliding the cold metal shape into his right hand. "If it was too magical for Magnussen to keep on campus, then the same is probably true for us. Someone's bound to sense its power and come sniffing around to see what it is."

He crossed to the Shard and held the horseshoe up before it, cradling the silvery weight gingerly in his palm. The metal was dulled and clouded with myriad scratches, but its shape was unmistakable. Purplish light glinted along its curved edges.

"It's bigger than I would have expected," Rose said, having approached the mirror on the Hogwarts side of the Shard. "It looks... heavy, somehow."

"It is," James admitted. "Almost like it comes from a place where gravity is less important. And it glows a little too. You can't see it unless all the lights are turned off and it's totally dark, but it's there, sort of faint purple, like the last bit of sunset."

"I can almost sense the magic from here," Rose said quietly. "You're right, you definitely need to hide it somewhere safe."

"At least until we can find a way to use it to get into the World Between the Worlds," Ralph nodded.

"But *that's* our main problem now," James said, turning back around and carrying the horseshoe to his bed.

On the other side of the Shard, Scorpius sighed. "Ah yes. Up until now, everyone believed that your Professor Magnussen had escaped into the Nexus with the help of his dimensional key. Now that you know that the man was, in fact, killed by a Muggle bullet, you have no way of knowing where the Nexus Curtain actually is."

"That was supposed to be the easy part," Ralph acknowledged, flopping back onto his bed. "We thought we'd just have to follow Magnussen to the Curtain. Getting the horseshoe from him was supposed to be the difficult bit."

James finished stuffing the horseshoe under his mattress again and stood up. "We're not completely stumped," he said stubbornly. "We still have Magnussen's other riddle. The one about the Nexus Curtain lying in the eyes of Roebitz. Zane's back working on that one again, although it's looking pretty bleak. There aren't a whole lot of Roebitzes in the world."

"I'll look it up on my side," Rose said briskly. "Maybe it isn't a person at all. You never know."

James sighed. "Thanks, Rose. We appreciate your help. Petra too."

"I'm doing this to help you and Uncle Harry find out the truth, James," Rose said, meeting his gaze through the glass of the Shard. "If it helps Petra, then that's all for the best. I'm not quite as confident about her as you are, though. Sorry."

James sighed again and nodded. From behind Rose, Scorpius watched James, his own eyes sharp, narrowed. Scorpius was more than unconvinced of Petra's innocence, James knew. Scorpius was outright suspicious of her.

Deep down, despite his own feelings to the contrary, James couldn't blame him.



As spring settled firmly over the school, tulips, daffodils, and snapdragons began to crowd the flowerbeds that lined the mall. The snapdragons, being of a magical variety, occasionally leaned lazily and nipped at the fat bumblebees that patrolled the flowerbeds. The days grew longer and warmer, and James finally packed away his winter cloak, happy to relegate it to the top of his closet along with his dress robes and the backup pair of spectacles that his mother had insisted he pack, which were, in reality, hand-me-downs from his father.

Clutchcudgel matches went from grueling dark and icy affairs to exhilarating romps through the mild evenings, lit by the rose-gold light of the later sunsets. Team Bigfoot continued its dogged refusal to be knocked out of the final tournament playoffs, winning a few matches, tying even more. Fortunately, since their standings had gradually improved over the course of the season, tie games often meant technical victories for the orange and blue team. No one expected the Foothills to actually get into the final tournament, but at least no one expected them to get knocked out easily. James was quietly very proud of the team and his own unique involvement with it. Even if they still ended

up dead last in the overall season standings, it would be a close thing. More importantly, the other teams respected Team Bigfoot now. Or, at the very least, didn't openly mock them.

Oliver Wood still showed a stubborn reluctance to encourage the use of anything other than the most basic magic during his team's matches. He did, however, allow the continuation of the team's game magic meetings and James began showing his fellow players some of the *Artis Decerto* tricks he'd learned during his last year's Defense Against the Dark Arts classes with Professor Kendrick Debellows.

"It isn't just about beating the other guy's magic with your own magic," he attempted to explain. "It's about beating his magic with your *mind*, by knowing what he's going to do even before he does it and being ready for it."

"Mind reading," Gobbins frowned skeptically. "I never understood that crazy voodoo stuff."

"It's not *voodoo*," Ralph said, shaking his head. "It's just knowing how people usually act and guessing what they're going to do before they do it. It's easier than you think. People are a lot less unpredictable than you'd ever guess."

James nodded enthusiastically. "Look at the Igors," he said, standing up. "Say it's the third quarter and they're down by ten. You see three of their Clippers lining up around the second turn. What are they up to?"

Jazmine laughed and shook her head. "They're stacking a pile-drive maneuver. Their lead Clipper has the Clutch and if he loses it somehow, he'll just toss it back to the guy behind him. That way, they've got two-man insurance that they'll make it to the goal."

"*That's* what I'm talking about," James nodded, pointing at her. "We don't have to wait to see what they're going to do in that situation. We already *know* that's their standard procedure, so we act *first*, sending some Bullies back to get in between them even before they line up. *That's Artis Decerto!*"

"But that's not *all* it is," Wentworth said, tilting his head. "It's also those crazy acrobatics you do out there on the skrim. You look like one of those guys from Cirque de Blasé."

"My mom took me to that last year," Norrick interjected.

Wentworth turned to him. "Did you like it?"

"Meh," Norrick shrugged. "When I think circus, I think guys walking tightropes and taming tigers and making pyramids out of dozens of elephants and stuff. I don't usually think of a bunch of dudes in tights swinging around on velvet ropes and doing yoga on flying carpets."

"Sounds pretty interesting to *me*," Jazmine admitted.

Norrick rolled his eyes. "That's 'cause you're a girl."

"Thanks for noticing," Jazmine replied sourly. "At least when *Ralph* says it, it sounds like a *good* thing." She smiled at Ralph across the room and his cheeks reddened. He coughed lightly and looked helplessly at James.

"Yeah," James nodded, struggling to stay on topic. "*Artis Decerto* is also about acrobatic kinds of stuff too. It's just a matter of using your whole body sort of like a tool or a weapon or a torpedo, whatever best suits the situation. You put both ideas together, and not only will you know *what* the other guy is about to do, you'll already be getting yourself into position to defeat it."

"Like when you got between that Zombie Clipper and Bully last match!" Wentworth exclaimed, sitting forward. "And you pretended to have a Clutch under your arm so the Bully would aim a gravity well at you, but then you spun around up over the other guy at just the right moment and the Bully shot his spell at his own Clipper and knocked him right out of the course and then ran into him because he was so surprised that he didn't even *see* the other guy behind you until you went all topsy-turvy and they both crashed into the ring like a couple of blind Rafewringers!" His eyes bulged excitedly at the memory and then he sighed deeply, leaning back again. "That was beautiful."

"Zane sure didn't think it was funny," Ralph muttered. "Although he *did* admit that it was a pretty good move."

"Yeah," James agreed, nodding at Wentworth. "Like that."

"But how do we practice stuff like *that*?" another player, Luca Fiorello, asked from the corner near the window.

James nodded resolutely. "Good question," he admitted. "And you won't like the answer, but... well... me, Ralph, Zane, and Professor Cloverhoof have set up something in the backyard. It's not anywhere near as good as the one back at Hogwarts and Zane and Professor Cloverhoof only helped us build it because we agreed to let Team Zombie use it as well, but trust us, it's the best way to learn *Artis Decerto*. Come on over and take a look."

James led the team out onto the third-floor landing, where they all crowded around the window that overlooked the mansion's walled back garden. There was a moment of tense, puzzled silence. Finally, Jazmine spoke up.

"What is it?" she asked, frowning.

James sighed at the irony of it all. In the yard below was a haphazard clockwork monstrosity of wooden cogs, treadmills, pommels, swinging weights, and wand-studded barrels.

"It's called the Gauntlet," he admitted. "And it's about to be your worst enemy."



Classes at Alma Aleron, which had at first seemed exotic and strange, had by now grown routine and even boring.

James' favorite classes were Clockwork Mechanics, Advanced Elemental Transmutation (which was the American equivalent of Transfiguration), Theoretical Gravity (which was still being taught by Oliver Wood), and Magi-American History with Professor Paul Bunyan. Having lived the long and amazing life of a giant in the country's frontier days, the professor taught a lot of his classes by way of firsthand stories. Some of the stories, admittedly, were embroidered with obvious tall tales, such as the details surrounding the origin of the Rocky Mountains (allegedly piles of cast-off rocks cleaned out of the giant's boot treads with a redwood trunk) and the creation of the Great Lakes (claimed to have been dug out by the giant's footprints when he was wrestling Babe, the giant blue ox, for the last pancake of a particularly delicious breakfast). A Vampire boy had once deigned to challenge Professor Bunyan's tall tales, confronting him with the fact that while he was indeed quite large, he was nowhere near big enough to leave footprints the size of Lake Superior.

"Were you bigger back then, maybe?" the boy asked, a smile curling the corner of his mouth.

Professor Bunyan merely scoffed and waved a hand. "I was always the same size," he said, his dark eyes twinkling. "But the *world* was a lot smaller back in those days. It's a known fact. Just ask Professor Wimwrinkle."

James had a suspicion that Bunyan knew that no one would actually do any such thing, being generally terrified of the Mageography professor, thus his allegations were, nominally, safe.

Mageography was, in fact, near the top of the list of James' least loved classes. Only marginally worse, however, was Forbidden Practices and Cursology with the insufferable Persephone Remora. Remora had, it seemed, developed a bit of a fixation with James and his famous father. As a result, her attitude toward him seemed to swing between doting favoritism and spiteful jealousy. James never knew, on any given Thursday afternoon, whether the professor would gesture for him to sit close to her in the front row—where she would favor him with conspiratorial winks and infuriatingly condescending pats on the head—or glower at him darkly, annoyed and impatient at his apparent lack of awe for her accomplishments and her self-proclaimed 'dark wiles'. James' last essay had been returned to him with the incomprehensible grade of 'INSIPID +' scrawled across the top of it in red, followed by the handwritten comment, '*You show mild promise IF you receive the proper tutelage. You know my office hours. See me.*'

"She either has a crush on you or she wants to poison you," Zane whispered, peering at the handwriting atop James' essay. "And you never know. With her, it could be both."

"No way I'm seeking her out for 'proper tutelage,'" James hissed from behind his hand. "I'll take 'insipid plus' for the rest of the year if I have to."

From the front of the classroom, Remora narrowed her eyes at him, her red lips pressed into a tight frown.

The rest of the semester's classes dragged on with varying degrees of boredom, challenge, and occasional strangeness. Muggle Occupation Studies, for instance, seemed to be the Alma Aleron version of Muggle Studies, but with a specific emphasis on learning about Muggle careers and

working conditions. Most of the class-times were spent on discussions of the difference between such concepts as ‘water cooler breaks’ and ‘coffee runs’, ‘cubicles’ versus ‘corner offices’, elevator etiquette, surreptitious use of magic in Muggle surroundings, and how to converse about the sorts of things most Muggles seemed to be interested in, such as Muggle sports, television, and the weather. James didn’t quite understand the point of the class since he himself planned to become an Auror like his father, but the teacher, a very fat woman by the name of Heather Wocziak (who, for some reason, nearly always wore a pink jogging outfit) insisted that Muggle occupational familiarity was “absolutely essential for all witches and wizards in the current social climate of magical-Muggle diversification”. James accepted this with a sigh, secretly vowing to forget everything he was learning once the final exams were over.

Potion-Making class continued to be an intriguing challenge despite the noticeable lack of Petra as Professor Baruti’s assistant. Besides teaching traditional Native American forms of potion-making via visits to the ancient city of Shackamaxon, Baruti spent much time demonstrating potion techniques from many of the world’s magical cultures, including Oriental enchanTeas, African steamcreatures, and Russian cold-soup tonics, most of which were made with a very potent clear liquor known as Stortch, known to melt cauldrons if they were not thoroughly pre-oiled with a thick coating of mucous eel slime.

James had once approached Professor Baruti after class and asked how things were going with Petra.

“Ms. Morganstern is coming along very well,” Baruti replied easily, displaying one of his stunningly bright smiles. “I see her once a week, most of the time. She misses her freedom, but her French is *très magnifique*.”

James nodded. “Any word about the investigation with that Keynes bloke? I haven’t heard a word about it from my parents. I think they’re trying to keep me from worrying about it, but I can handle it.”

Baruti clucked his tongue and shook his head dismissively. “Don’t you worry about that, young Master James. Ms. Morganstern is not worried! Why should you be? If tomorrow brings trouble, it will bring the solution as well.” He patted James on the shoulder with his large callused hand and James nodded disconsolately.

The only class that James was performing particularly poorly in was Arithmatics. Taught by a young professor named Plumvole with far more enthusiasm for the subject than actual teaching ability, James simply couldn’t wrap his mind around the long, dense formulas and symbols scrawled onto the magical blackboard. As a result, he was pressed to attend occasional tutoring sessions with Professor Plumvole in his office on the fifth floor of Administration Hall. The professor was thoroughly patient with James, explaining the concepts over and over on parchment while James leaned on the desk, his forehead cradled helplessly in his hands. He still didn’t understand the equations, but Plumvole was so infatuated with his own explanations that he didn’t notice James’ complete lack of involvement.

As a result, Plumvole completed all of James’ homework while James himself merely watched. At the end of the last session, Plumvole clapped James heartily on the shoulder, promising that they

were making excellent progress. Sheepishly, James nodded, shrugged and bid the professor goodnight.

It was growing dark outside the Administration Hall's tall windows as James meandered his way to the ground floor. Passing a set of propped-open auditorium doors, however, he heard a familiar voice. It was Professor Wood giving a lecture to an audience of college-level students. James remembered that Wood taught a subject called Ethics of Magic, which Zane had promised was 'dead boring'. Still, James was curious. He stopped to listen, hovering just inside the open doorway.

"So," Wood was saying, turning to a huge blackboard and pointing his wand at it, "the question of intervention revolves around these three primary questions: motive, benefit, and repercussion.

"Before considering any intervention in the affairs of our Muggle fellows, we must *honestly* ask ourselves: one: why are we doing it? Is it truly for the Muggles' good? Or for another, more selfish reason? Two: what is the *real benefit* that might be gained by such an intervention? Is it worth the risks involved? We cannot judge this on feelings alone; we must answer this impartially and honestly. Finally, what are all the possible repercussions of such an action? As in the example, if a fellow wizard is being attacked by Muggle robbers in an alley and we Stun the leader within sight of his cohorts, is the damage of that magical revelation worth the money that the attackers might have stolen? This is a safe example for it involves only money and is therefore easier to consider. But the equation might well involve lives rather than coin. It is ethically incumbent on us to consider: if we save a life but harm the integrity of the magical/Muggle worlds for thousands of others, *is* that a worthy intervention?

"There are no obvious conclusions, but as we have seen in the examples, any interaction between the Muggle and magical world that fails in any one of these considerations threatens, at the very least, the integrity of those involved, and potentially, the very stability of our twin cultures. Easy answers are tempting, as we all know—answers that rely on emotion and goodwill and basic concepts of immediate justice—but easy answers can lead to horrific consequences. This is the weight of responsibility that we, unlike our Muggle brothers, bear. It is no easy burden, but that does not give us an excuse to shrug it off. We must consider the fact that, despite how we might feel, *sometimes* it is better—and more deeply responsible—to do nothing. Sometimes we cannot trust our feelings alone. Sometimes, the heart is a liar."

James didn't quite understand everything that Wood was saying, but the last part stuck with him: *sometimes the heart is a liar*. Petra Morganstern had, in fact, said something almost exactly like that, James remembered. Months earlier, when they'd talked, strangely enough, about the Bible story of Adam and Eve. Eve had born the burden of the same sort of responsibility that Wood was talking about—the responsibility to consider that sometimes what felt right was, in fact, exactly the wrong thing to do. *She wasn't evil*, Petra had said that day, as they'd walked toward the Warping Willow under Professor Baruti's shimmering rainbow umbrella. *She was just... misinformed. She was doing what she felt was best.*

Sometimes... the heart is a liar, Petra had told him that day, her eyes solemn. In James' memory, though, Petra didn't sound quite like she meant it. She sounded more as if she was *trying on* the concept, the way someone might try on a shoe or a hat just to see if it fit.

For some reason, the thought made James shudder. Without waiting for Professor Wood to finish his lecture, he turned and followed the hall toward the stairs at the far end, shaking his head worriedly.

It was fully dark outside by the time James crossed the campus, heading toward Apollo Mansion. The mall was virtually deserted, lit by the occasional lamppost and the glow of lights from the other houses. Light glinted off a large dark orb as James passed a pool. Stopping, he saw that it was the Octosphere. It turned slowly, shimmering in the moonglow and creating its soft, almost inaudible rumble. James frowned at it in the darkness, thinking.

Professor Magnussen had created the Octosphere, his first attempt at reading all things in the universe at once and therefore predicting—and controlling—the future. Everyone believed that Magnussen had finally succeeded, in a way: they believed that he'd escaped into the World Between the Worlds, leaving this dimension forever. James knew the truth, however. Magnussen had been struck down in vengeance for the acts he'd committed in pursuit of his horrible plan. He may once have trod the World Between the Worlds, as he had claimed in the Disrecorder vision, but he certainly had not ended up there. As Kendrick Debellows had once said during last year's classes, the warrior who trusts only in the greatness of his magic will trip over the smallest stone. Magnussen had been extremely arrogant, and he had tripped over the smallest stone imaginable—one the size of a single Muggle bullet.

Suddenly, James remembered that he, himself, had very nearly interfered with that reality. He had jumped out from his hiding place in the alley, wand in hand, prepared to duel Magnussen rather than watch him kill the Muggle man, William. If he had intervened only a second earlier, he probably would have interrupted Helen in the act of aiming her pistol. What would have happened? Would Magnussen have defeated them all? Might James, Ralph, and Zane have somehow prevailed over the professor and saved Helen from the act of shooting him? How would that have affected history and the lives of all those involved?

James shook his head and shivered. Wood was right: it was scary to consider the repercussions of such things. James himself had very nearly changed history, and in a rather dramatic way. Somehow, he knew that it was best that he had not—that his intervention had been a split second too late. Maybe it wasn't the best possible reality that Helen had shot and killed Magnussen, but James was secretly sure that if things had gone any other way, it could have been far worse in the end.

But what about now? Was he, James, interfering again? His own mother and father had warned him not to get involved in any more grandiose adventures. Even Patches the cat seemed to have offered warnings, first suggesting they rush for Igor House and then appearing in the Archive, apparently cautioning them against viewing the Disrecorder visions of Professor Magnussen. Should James have heeded those warnings? He'd tried to in the beginning. And yet how could he allow Petra to go to prison for something she might not have done? Wasn't it his responsibility to help her?

Or, at the very least, to do what he could to reveal the truth of what had really happened that night, when the Vault of Destinies had been attacked?

There are no easy answers, Wood had said. James shook his head slowly, knowing that the professor was right. He drew a deep breath and plopped down onto the low wall that bordered the pool of the Octosphere. The great black orb turned hypnotically, rumbling faintly.

"Tell me, Octosphere," James said in a low voice, staring at the huge stone shape, "am I doing the wrong thing? Should I just leave well enough alone?"

The orb continued to turn, as if it didn't intend to answer such a vague question. Then, however, it began to slow. Cloudy letters swam up from the orb's murky depths. James leaned closer and squinted as the words formed, glowing dimly in the moonlight.

BETTER NOT TELL YOU NOW.

James frowned. He knew that the Octosphere was rumored never to give helpful answers, but it was *always* supposed to give a *correct* answer, no matter how indecipherable. He decided to try again, being more specific.

"All right," he said. "Will I make something awful happen by trying to help Petra?"

Immediately, the white words faded from the surface of the orb. It began to turn again, first slowly, and then faster so that water crept up the sides of the sphere, running back in trickling rivulets. Finally, after nearly a minute, the orb slowed again. Dim shapes swam deep within it, resolving slowly. James leaned close, watching the letters float to the surface, as if from a very deep, dark well.

YOU WILL NOT.

James read the words over several times and then breathed a long sigh of relief. Perhaps the legends about the Octosphere were wrong. After all, this was a clear answer, both helpful and straightforward. As long as it was true, then there was nothing to worry about. And according to Zane, the Octosphere's answers were *always* true, even if they weren't obvious.

James shuddered again, feeling a cool breeze ripple over the campus and shush in the nearby trees. He stood up again and continued on his way to Apollo Mansion, renewed in his mission even if he didn't know exactly what he was supposed to do next. Neither he, Ralph, nor Zane knew the location of the Nexus Curtain or the meaning of Magnussen's remaining riddle. Still, at least he could feel some confidence that they weren't going to ruin everything even if they did figure it all out.

In the darkness behind him, the glowing words began to drift slowly into the depths of the Octosphere and it began to turn again, slowly, resuming its low rumble. No one was there to see it, but the word 'You' remained visible for nearly a minute after the others had faded out, almost as if it had some special, secret emphasis.

After all, the Octosphere always told the truth. But it was *never* helpful.



On the third Saturday in April, James, Zane, and Ralph climbed their way to the library in the Tower of Art, ostensibly to do homework, but also in hopes of researching a new lead in the Roebitz riddle.

The library occupied the space immediately below the penthouse museum and took up the equivalent of three full floors with its dizzyingly tall bookshelves and rolling ladders, long polished tables decked with green Bankers Lamps, and overhanging balconies, stairways, and landings. High in the very center of the space, visible from nearly every angle, hung a monstrous crystal chandelier, its thousands of pendants winking rainbow prisms in the glinting candlelight.

Around this, somewhat unsettlingly, books of all sizes flew like bats, flapping their covers, their ribbon bookmarks trailing behind them like kite tails. James had been to the library several times before he realized that the flying books were actually part of the library's shelving system. Loose tomes would occasionally soar up from the carts next to the front desk and circle the chandelier, almost as if it were a sort of roundabout. One at a time, the books would eventually swoop back down toward the leaning monolithic bookshelves, furl their covers with a soft *thunk*, and slip into place with their fellows.

James had a strange suspicion that part of the reason that the books spent so much time circling the chandelier was because they were (being magical books) very slightly alive and liked the hustle and bustle of what the librarian referred to as 'the sorting cloud'. The ripple of their pages and the gentle clap of their covers as the books circled the chandelier sounded vaguely like whispered speech and James couldn't help wondering if the books spent their time in the cloud trading gossip stories about the students and teachers below.

Considering the way James sometimes treated his own library books, this was not a very comforting thought.

"This really seems like a long shot," Ralph whispered as they settled down to a table on the edge of one of the upper balconies. "I mean, fish eggs?"

"*Roe*," Zane replied, annoyed. "Fish eggs are called roe. *Roe-bits*? It's worth checking out, at least. Maybe Magnussen was really into aquariums or something. Maybe he hid the secret of the Nexus Curtain in some fish food and fed it to his pet catfish, which then had baby fish... and... er."

James pressed his lips together tentatively. "It's a long shot," he said, agreeing with Ralph.

"I don't see *you* two coming up with any genius brainstorms," Zane groused, pulling a huge picture book toward him. On the front of it was a moving photograph of the Loch Ness Monster snapping its prodigious jaws. The title was embossed in gold: '*MAGICAL FISH and MARINE LIFE OF THE WORLD*'.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," James said, slipping out of his seat. "I need to find a book for my kettles and cauldrons Home Ec paper."

"Don't remind me," Ralph said, rolling his eyes. "I have to write a paragraph on the difference between cupcakes and muffins."

"You ought to be an expert on that," Zane said without looking up from his book. "You ate three of each at breakfast just this morning."

Ralph frowned. "It was research," he said a little defensively.

James worked his way back down the stairs to the main floor and then meandered through several rows of tall, crooked bookshelves. The highest levels seemed to totter precariously over him, their books threatening to spill from their shelves at the slightest provocation.

After several turns, James finally found the reference section. Huge dusty volumes lined the shelves, bowing the wood under their accumulated weight. Finally, near the end of the aisle, James found what he was looking for. An entire section was devoted to an anthology of huge encyclopedias, all arranged by letter and subject. There appeared to be thousands of volumes in the collection, each cloth-bound in frayed beige, their spines nearly two feet tall. James craned his neck to see into the upper levels of the bookcase and then pulled one of the wheeled ladders toward him. The rungs squeaked as he began to climb.

He stopped halfway up the ladder and reached carefully for a particular volume. A huge embossed letter *S* decorated the top portion of the spine. Beneath this were the words '*SNYXPORIUM through SORDHISIUS*'. Clutching the heavy book against his chest, James inched back down the ladder. He sat down cross-legged on the floor at the base of the ladder and cradled the huge volume on his knees. After a brief pause, he opened it.

The book smelled like mildew and dust, but its pages were thick and creamy-smooth, yellowed only slightly along the edges. Full-page illustrations filled the book alongside dense fields of small print.

Normally, of course, this was the sort of thing Rose would be assigned to do. As Zane had said, she really was like their very own personal research department. Some things, however, James had been reluctant to share even with his closest companions. The topic he was looking up now was

one of those things. He began to riffle through the encyclopedia's pages as quietly as possible until he reached a particular heading, nearly halfway through. He stared down at the words, his lips pressed into a thin line.

SORCERESS: *see Sorcerer, female.*

Slowly, James turned back a page. Leaning slightly lower over the book, he began to read.

SORCERER:

Defined simplistically as a magical human male, a sorcerer should not be confused with a wizard. While both are primarily determined by their predisposition to spellwork, potion-making, and the use of magical objects, there is a marked difference in the fundamental source of those powers. While witches and wizards draw upon magical resources within their own bodies (see: *Intrinsic Magic*), sorcerers collect their powers from external resources, such as growing things, kinetic energy reserves (oceans), or even the passage of time (see: *Elemental Magic, types and uses*). For this reason, sorcerers (or, in the Old Language, *Sorcereurs*) are potentially far more powerful than a typical witch or wizard depending on the residual magical resources of their surroundings. Similarly, where a typical magical individual's power is a constant, a sorcerer's power may be diminished to the point of abject weakness if he is cut off from those magical resources.

It is interesting to note, however, that in every recorded instance, a sorcerer only derives power from *one type* of extrinsic source. For instance, a sorcerer who draws his strength from growing things will find himself considerably weakened when placed within a desert environment. Theoretically, this is an example of the law of conservation of powers, which predicts that *absolute* power will always be prohibited within a balanced natural world.

Origins and Explanations:

While there are many theories regarding the origins of sorcerers, none have been conclusively proven. All such theories, however, can be broken up into two predominant categories: the *Serendipitous* and the *Causational*.

The Serendipitous theory states that a sorcerer is *always* created when a certain series of variable requirements are met. The most well-known Serendipitous theory is the “seventh son of a seventh son” premise, which merely states that any seventh male offspring of a wizard who is, himself, a seventh male offspring will, without exception, be a sorcerer. Other theories are far more complicated, suggesting deviations in times of the year, phases of the moon, ages

and lineage of the parents, and even the number of windows in the room of the child's birth.

Adherents to the Causalational theory, however, postulate a much different origin, owing itself not at all to randomly determined variables but to the balance of the magical world in general. In short, the Causalational theory states that when the scales of the cosmos require a sorcerer (either to maintain balance or to destroy it), then a sorcerer will, out of sheer necessity, appear.

Notably, one variation of the Causalational theory adds that there can never be only *one* sorcerer. In order for the polarities of destiny to remain in check (the theory claims) there must always be a duality: either no sorcerers whatsoever or two. This theory, however, like all the rest, has never been proven or disproven.

Historical Examples:

While any number of legendary sorcerers have appeared in the annals of history, there are very few documented cases of the existence of such individuals. The most well-known and verified instance is Merlinus Ambrosius, whose powers, mysterious origins, and legendary disappearance describe the very archetype of the classical sorcerer.

During his lifetime, he was known to conjure feats of such devastating natural ferocity, including (but not limited to) earthquakes, floods, typhoons, walking forests, and tidal waves, that he was by turns revered and/or vilified by all who knew of him. Since his time (approximately 935-980 AD) there has been no uncontested evidence of another living sorcerer.

Variations—Elves, Goblins, Sorceresses

While both elvenkind and goblinkind also derive their powers from extrinsic magical sources, they are *not* technically considered sorcerers (despite long-standing arguments by goblin leaders and species rights advocates). Since both goblins and elves can only *contain* the equivalent of any average magical person's power, they do not meet the 'Limitless Magical Expression requirement' (set forth by the *Magical Defining Characteristics Census of 1177*) for sorcerer status.

Contrariwise, there has existed a long-standing theory that claims that the existence of sorcerers implies, by logical necessity, the possibility of sorceresses—that is, a female whose source of power is extrinsic and who is capable of summoning limitless expressions of that extrinsic resource based upon its availability. Despite this, no irrefutable example of such a person has ever been verified.

James lowered the book and leaned slowly back, letting his head bump the bookshelf behind him. For several seconds, he merely stared up past the canyon of the leaning bookcases toward the books which flapped silently through the library's upper levels, winging toward their shelves.

It made perfect sense. That was the most dreadful part. The passage in the encyclopedia was like the center piece of a puzzle, the one that brought all the separate bits together and formed the full picture. As incredible as it seemed—as completely gut-wrenchingly unbelievable as it would appear to any sane observer—Petra Morganstern... was a sorceress.

James shook his head slowly, barely able to grasp the concept.

He remembered the first time he had met Petra, back on his first night at Hogwarts. Ted had introduced her to him along with the rest of the Gremlins. She had seemed merely pretty and smart then, the perfect foil for the brash insolence of the rest of the Gremlins. James had had classes with her throughout that year. In all honesty, he had begun, even then, to feel the faintest stirrings of romantic magnetism toward her. Most assuredly, there was something unique about her—something rare and slightly dark, both inspiring and solemn. Even so, how could this slight, smart girl—the one with the tendency to suck thoughtfully on the ends of her raven-dark hair and doodle dancing elves in the margins of her textbooks—how could that girl possibly be something so powerful, so rare, and so potentially frightening as a sorceress?

And yet, of course, James knew it was true. It *had* to be true. Everything pointed to it, from the mysteries surrounding her last day at Morganstern Farm to the amazing magic she seemed to perform without any wand to the strange silver thread that had appeared when she'd fallen from the back of the *Gwyndemere*—conjured by James, but drawn, apparently, from her own power.

Merlin, of course, was a sorcerer. Was that why he was so interested in Petra? Was that why he was worried about what she might do? Was she his equal? His *opposite*?

James shuddered, violently, and the encyclopedia nearly fell off his lap. Instinctively, he grabbed at it and then closed it with a soft thump.

For the first time, seriously, he wondered if Petra really *had* been involved in the attack on the Vault of Destinies. Thus far, James had been able to convince himself that it couldn't really have been her that he'd seen on that night coming out of the Archive alongside the creepy woman in the black robes. He'd convinced himself that it had to have been a trick—someone using Polyjuice Potion, for instance, or perhaps even a *Visum-ineptio* charm. But what if none of that was true? What if Petra really *was* in league with the mysterious dark woman, and had been lying all along about her innocence? Worse, what if the Morgan part of Petra's mind, the part influenced by the final shred of Lord Voldemort's soul, had broken free of the mental prison that Petra had erected for it—the black castle in her dreams—and had *taken over* somehow?

What if James, Ralph, and Zane succeeded in breaking through to the World Between the Worlds only to find irrefutable proof that it *had* been Petra (Morgan) who had broken into the Hall of Archives, cursed Mr. Henredon, and then stolen the crimson thread from the foreign dimension's Vault of Destinies? What then? Would the courts send Petra to wizarding prison?

Perhaps even worse, would they be *unable* to?

For one bright, horrible moment, James envisioned the dark-haired girl (Petra/Morgan) walking resolutely down the center of a broad road, peppered with green Killing Curses and yet unfazed, her brow lowered in cold fury, her eyes flashing black sparks and lightning crackling between her clawed fingertips.

She's not evil, he told himself resolutely. It was almost a mantra, an incantation. In his deepest heart, he both believed it utterly and doubted it hopelessly. The friction between the two warring convictions was nearly overwhelming, almost like a breaking heart.

"Petra's not evil," he whispered, his eyes wide and bright in the darkness of the library aisle. "She's just..." He cut himself off with a gasp, realizing what he was about to say. Suddenly, he felt very cold, chilled nearly to the bone. This time, when the encyclopedia tried to slide off of his crossed legs, James let it. He barely even noticed.

She's not evil, he thought helplessly. *She's just... misinformed.*

Like Eve. Just misinformed.



"What's with you, James?" Zane asked the following Thursday as the three left Cursology class and made their way into a bright, warm afternoon.

James hefted his books and squinted into the sunlight. "Nothing. Why?"

"You've been all quiet lately," Zane pressed. "Even Ralph's noticed."

Ralph nodded. "S'true. You didn't even show up for Clutch magic practice the other day. I had to power the Gauntlet myself. Didn't go so well either."

Zane laughed and clapped Ralph on the shoulder. "That's 'cause you still haven't learned to rein in that Godzilla wand of yours. I hear the Gauntlet was running so fast that parts of it were a blur. Is that true?"

"The team sure didn't think it was funny," Ralph admitted, raking his fingers through his hair. "But it definitely sharpened their reflexes. I swear, at one point, it looked like Fiorello was in two places at once trying to evade one of those clockwork battering arms."

"I'm fine," James sighed, approaching the sprawling ruin of Roberts' burnt mansion. He plopped onto a broken wall and stared out along the sunlit mall. "I'm just annoyed that we haven't

figured this last bit out yet. I mean, we can't keep the horseshoe hidden forever. Someone's going to sniff it out and then we'll be totally sunk."

Zane shrugged and joined James on the broken end of the wall. Tall grass swished around the boys' feet where they dangled over the side. "I don't know," he replied. "Hiding the unicorn's shoe in the roots of the Warping Willow was totally genius. That horseshoe may have some powerful mojo in it, but if it's stronger than the Willow, I'll eat a Clutch. That's a big score for the Ralphinator."

"It was nothing," Ralph said, trying not to grin with pride. "I was just thinking back to our first year when Delacroix hid the Merlin throne right on Hogwarts grounds since it was the only place in the country that was magical enough and protected enough to overshadow that kind of power. If it worked for her, I thought it might work for us."

Zane nodded. "It's an excellent idea no matter what. I bet if old Mags had thought of it, he might actually have *made* it to the World Between the Worlds and not gotten shot down in an alley like a cowboy at high noon."

James shook his head, not at all sharing in his friends' carefree attitudes. "It's just that it's *taking* too long," he said, smacking his hand on the stone next to him. "That idiot Keynes, the arbiter, is nearly finished with his inspection. Dad sent me a note saying that he ran into him at the Crystal Mountain. Keynes told him that he wouldn't need to interview any of us after all, said that he'd found all the information he needed elsewhere. That can only mean one thing, can't it? He's about ready to make his judgment and he's found just what he needed to convict Petra and send her to prison!"

"But who could he have talked to?" Ralph asked, kicking at the weeds near a fallen chunk of stone wall. "We were the only witnesses to what happened. Who else would tell him that someone that looked an awful lot like Petra came walking out afterwards? I mean, the only people we told were Rose and Scorpius through the Shard. If Keynes had talked to them, they definitely would have told us."

James frowned dourly. Ralph may be right about Rose, but James himself wasn't so sure about Scorpius. "Either way, if we're going to figure out this stupid riddle, we'd better do it right quick. Otherwise, there won't be any point. They'll have passed judgment on Petra and carted her off and Izzy will wind up in some Muggle foster home, probably with all her memories of us completely Obliviated."

"But we've checked out everything we could think of," Zane said, raising his eyebrows and hands at the same time. "We got bupkis! If the Nexus Curtain lies within the eyes of Roebitz, then Roebitz sure ain't talking about it. *I'm* all out of ideas and I know from experience that that means *you* two are completely tapped out as well." He sighed and shook his head.

"Hey, *I'm* the one what thought of hiding the horseshoe under the Warping Willow," Ralph reminded the blonde boy, scowling in annoyance. Zane shrugged again and rolled his eyes.

"I just hate feeling stuck like this," James groused darkly. "We're so *close* and yet we're completely stymied. I feel like that bloke Roberts who had to live on top of the sunken Aquapolis

like a shipwreck survivor, so close to civilization, but cut off from it, all alone up on top with nothing but the waves and the seagulls to keep him company.” He leaned forward and crossed his forearms over his knees, exhaling dourly. A moment later, he realized that Zane was staring hard at him.

“*What* did you just say?” the blonde boy asked in a low, emphatic voice.

James shrugged it off. “It was just this bloke that we met on the journey here. He lived on the very top of the Aquapolis, the part that poked up out of the ocean like an island whenever the city was sunk beneath the surface...”

“No, no,” Zane said, his eyes growing sharp. “Before that! *What* did you say his name was?”

James glanced quizzically back at Zane, but it was Ralph who answered.

“Roberts?” he said. “What’s the big deal about that?”

Zane’s eyes bulged. He looked back and forth between James and Ralph in apparent amazement. “*What’s the big deal?*” he exclaimed. “You two just *said* it! *Roebitz!* You’re seriously telling me that this island dude’s name was *Roebitz*?!”

James looked aside at Ralph. “We didn’t *say* Roebitz,” he replied in a puzzled voice. “We said *Roberts*. Can’t you hear?”

“Spell it!” Zane demanded, nearly vibrating with excitement.

Ralph sighed, and spelled out the name. Zane’s eyes bulged even further.

“It’s your accent!” he said, as if to himself. “The English accent! When you say Roberts... it sounds like *Roebitz*!”

“We don’t have any accent,” Ralph scowled. “You Americans do.”

“Don’t you see?” Zane said, pushing James hard enough to nearly knock him off the stone wall. “Magnussen spoke with the same accent you two do! He never approved of the country’s break from England and insisted on speaking the same way you Brits do! He called it ‘the King’s English’, remember?”

James’ own eyes began to widen slowly. “In the Disrecorder vision,” he said, “when Franklyn was explaining Magnussen’s riddles, he *imitated* Magnussen’s *accent*! We didn’t recognize it, though since Franklyn’s an American. We heard it wrong because we didn’t recognize that he was mimicking the way Magnussen *spoke*. He didn’t say ‘Roebitz’ at all!”

Ralph finished the thought for all of them. “He said *Roberts*,” the big boy breathed in a low voice, glancing at his friends. “The Nexus Curtain... lies within the eyes of *Roberts*!”

All three boys stared at one another, dumbstruck. Slowly, they all turned toward the ruin behind them, looking up over the broken bits of garden wall and the weed-choked stairs toward the remains of the grand façade. The lintel over the door still bore the engraved name of the original owner: ‘ROBERTS’.

In front of this, jutting crookedly up out of the tall grass, just as always, was the statue of the man himself, his stern face weathered with age, his wand held purposely at his side.

"The eyes of Roberts," James said quietly, suddenly flush with adrenaline.

"It *can't* be that easy," Ralph muttered, shaking his head. "Can it?"

"Only one way to find out," Zane said, jumping down from the stone wall and clapping his hands together. "Whaddaya say, Ralph? Feel like giving me a little boost?"



Three minutes later, James stood in the shadow of the statue of Roberts, peering up at Zane as he stood atop Ralph's shoulders, struggling to reach the back of the statue's head.

"It's a good thing this thing's pedestal is mostly buried in the dirt," Ralph grunted. "Otherwise we'd never be able to reach the top of it."

"There're holes in the back of the head!" Zane called down. "Two of them, side by side, see? Push me up a little higher, Ralph."

"I'm pushing as high as I can," Ralph groaned, struggling to stand on tiptoes. "What do you see?"

"Nothing," Zane said, his voice muffled as he pressed his eyes to the back of the statue's head. "The holes go all the way through the statue, right out the eyes, as far as I can tell. But there isn't anything inside here at all."

James frowned, and then a burst of inspiration struck him. "Can you see through the front?" he called up. "Like, what if the secret isn't literally *in* his eyes. What if it's what he's looking at?"

Zane was silent for a moment as he struggled to line up his own eyes with the holes in the back of the statue's head. Finally, he shook his head.

"No good," he replied. "It's all blurry. I can't line up the holes, somehow. It's like being totally near-sighted."

"Hurry it up," Ralph grunted. "Your heels are like anvils. How can a skinny little prat like you weigh so bloody much?"

"Wait a minute!" James said suddenly. "I've got an idea!"

Swiftly, he dropped his knapsack and unzipped it. He dug for several seconds and finally retrieved something from the bag's recesses.

"Here," he said, jumping up and turning to Ralph. "Hand these up to him."

"Your glasses?" Ralph frowned, glancing at the object in his hands. "You're serious?"

"It could work!" James insisted. "Just hand them up to him!"

"Let's see 'em, Ralph," Zane called down, reaching. "You never know. James is due for a good idea one of these times."

Ralph reached up and handed the glasses off to Zane. Carefully, Zane stretched up again, wrapping his arm around the statue's neck and pushing the glasses onto the stony face.

"Uh oh," he said suddenly.

"What!?" James called.

"I heard a crack," the blonde boy called back. "I think ol' Roberts has a bigger head than you, James. I think he broke the nose of your specs. Sorry."

James sighed. "I have a spare," he said, rolling his eyes. "Can you see any better?"

Zane pressed his eyes to the back of Roberts' carved head again. There was a long, tense moment as he adjusted the glasses and struggled to pull himself into position. He was nearly riding piggyback on the statue's leaning back now.

"It works!" he finally announced. "Sorta."

"What do you mean 'sorta'?" Ralph asked.

Zane adjusted the spectacles on the statue's face again. "Well," he called down, "I can see through Roberts' eyes all right. The glasses work almost like a telescope. It's just that there isn't much to see. At least, not anything that's very helpful."

"What is it?" James demanded, nearly hopping with impatience.

"Roberts seems to just be staring straight down the mall toward Administration Hall," Zane replied, still peering through the back of the statue's head. "He's looking right at the front doors, in fact. They're propped open, so I can see right through the main corridor. Hey! There's Albus and Lucy! Probably going to get an early dinner."

James shook his head. "That *can't* be the secret entrance to the Nexus Curtain. We've been in there a hundred times."

"Well, that's what's in the eyes of Roberts," Zane called back. "Maybe we should go snoop around in there a little more. Who knows what might be—" He stopped suddenly and pressed himself harder against the back of the statue's head, frowning slightly.

"*What?*" Ralph asked impatiently. "What might be what?"

"Hold on," Zane said. "Someone's opening up the doors on the other end of the main corridor now. I can see straight through the whole building. Cool."

James waited. He knew what was on the other end of the campus, behind Administration Hall. Victory Hill was the honorary home of every year's Clutchcudgel tournament winner. According to tradition, the night of the final match was marked by the magical March of the Houses, when the winning team's residence would magically arise from its cellar and circle the campus, coming to rest on the permanent foundation atop the hill near Pepperpock Down. Unfortunately, Zane himself had not witnessed a March of the Houses, nor had anyone else for the past ten years or so, since Team Werewolf had handily won the Clutchcudgel tournament for over a decade, thus holding onto that position of honor.

"It's just Ares Mansion," Zane called down. "I can only see the base of it through the back of Administration Hall, up on Victory Hill. *Man*, I hate those guys."

"Is that it?" Ralph asked, exasperated.

"That's it," Zane replied. "Just the foundation up on Victory Hill with that big mausoleum house of theirs sitting on top of it. The only part that's really visible is the cornerstone with that weird little 'U' engraved on it."

James frowned. "Weird little 'U'?"

"Yeah," Zane sighed. "On the cornerstone of the permanent foundation, there's just this odd symbol like a little letter 'U'. Nobody knows what it stands for. 'University' maybe? Or 'U are here'?"

James narrowed his eyes very thoughtfully. "Are you certain..." he asked slowly, "that it's a 'U'?"

He peered up at Zane. The blonde boy looked down at him. Slowly, his eyebrows rose up onto his forehead as his eyes widened.

Ralph's knees buckled slightly. In a strained voice, he said, "This means you can get off my shoulders now, right?"



"What do *you* three want?" an older Werewolf boy called from the high portico of Ares Mansion as James, Zane and Ralph approached. James recognized the speaker as Clayton Altaire, the captain of the Werewolf Clutch team.

"Oh, we're just here to bask in your glory for a minute," Zane replied from the footpath that circled Victory Hill. "Don't pay any attention to us."

Altaire scowled at them suspiciously. "What's that you got in the bag, then?"

"Oh, this?" James asked, his face reddening. He looked down at the black velvet bag in his right hand. "It's nothing. Just, er..."

"It's his Technomancy homework," Ralph volunteered. "Totally dangerous stuff. Strictly experimental magic. I wouldn't even look directly at it if I was you."

Altaire nodded skeptically toward Zane. "I know you, Walker. If you're trying to prank us..."

"Me?" Zane asked, his face a mask of wounded innocence. "Never! Why, I'll have you know that this here is James Potter! His brother is Albus, one of your Werewolf brethren. We'd *never* do anything to cause any trouble for little ol' Al, would we fellas?" He looked back and forth between James and Ralph, who nodded silently.

"Albus," Altaire smirked. "Yeah, our little Cornelius. I'll tell him you 'popped in for a chat'." He turned and walked into the shadow of the doorway, chuckling to himself.

"Yeah, you do that, stump-head," Zane muttered, rolling his eyes. He turned to James. "All right, come on. Let's see if it fits."

"I don't like having that thing out in broad daylight," Ralph said, following closely as James and Zane angled toward the corner of Ares Mansion, passing a rather large bronze statue of a fiercely snarling werewolf with blank amber eyes embedded into its face. James knew that the statue had been a gift from an alumnus, erected some ten years ago. Albus had told him that the members of the Werewolf Clutchcudgel team ritualistically rubbed the statue's snarling muzzle on every game day as they made their way to Pepperpock Down. James shuddered as he passed before the glinting bronze figure, not liking that frozen, toothy growl.

As the three approached the cornerstone of the house's permanent foundation, James saw that it was quite a large block of solid granite. At the very top of it, engraved right up to the edge, was a squat U-shape.

"It'll only take a second, Ralph," James said, feeling rather nervous himself. "We just need to see if it's the same shape. If the horseshoe is the dimensional key, then this could be the keyhole. If it's not, then we'll just take it back and hide it under the Warping Willow again."

Ralph gulped. "You mean if it fits, we're going to go through into the World Between the Worlds right *now*?"

"Relax, Ralphinator," Zane hissed impatiently. "We're just going to see if it works. We'll come back later for our big entrance if all goes as planned."

Glancing around to assure no one was watching, James slipped the silver horseshoe from its bag. The three boys crowded around the cornerstone as he held it up next to the engraved shape.

"Well," Ralph said hesitantly, "it fits... a little."

"The engraved shape's too short," Zane said, shaking his head. "The top part's cut off."

James peered at the horseshoe as he held it up against the engraved U-shape. "The bottom bit fits perfectly," he agreed. "It's almost like the top half of the cornerstone is missing."

"That makes sense," Zane said. "None of the buildings are on their original foundations. Every time there's a new Clutchcudgel tournament winner, the houses swap around. I bet nobody even remembers which house was originally built on this foundation."

"So if we can figure out which house's cornerstone shows the *top* half of the horseshoe," Ralph ventured, "then we'll know where the entrance to the Nexus Curtain is, right?"

"Maybe," James said, slipping the horseshoe back into its velvet bag. "But I have a feeling that the only way the dimensional key will work is if we get the right house onto the right foundation."

Zane shrugged optimistically. "That's easy! Like Ralph said, we just need to find out which house has the rest of the horseshoe on its cornerstone and then make sure that that house wins the Clutch tourney. If we're lucky, it'll be Hermes Mansion. We Zombies are up for a win this year. I can feel it."

James slumped as a sinking certainty settled over him. He shook his head slowly.

"I don't think," he said morosely, "that it's going to be Hermes Mansion."



"Wow," Ralph said a short time later as the three boys stood in the bushes in front of Bigfoot House. "How'd you know?"

"Couldn't say," James answered with a sigh. "It just makes a certain kind of backward sense, doesn't it?"

Zane nodded firmly, his lips pressed into a tight line as he stared down at the cornerstone of Apollo Mansion. Sure enough, the bottom edge of the stone showed the twin markings of the top of the silver horseshoe. "So," he said heartily, still nodding, "in order to open the Nexus Curtain and potentially prove the innocence of our good friend Petra Morganstern, the *worst* Clutch team in a decade has to win the tournament against the *best* Clutch team in a decade. Is that about it? Do I have this straight?"

"I'm afraid so," James answered dourly.

Zane nodded some more. "Well, then," he said, "one thing above all else is absolutely certain."

"What's that?" Ralph asked, a little hesitantly.

Zane looked gravely at both James and Ralph and then answered, "You're gonna need a bigger Gauntlet."



Over the following weeks, James approached Team Bigfoot's Clutch magic practices with renewed vigor. They did indeed expand the Gauntlet, adding a gyroscopic flight pad section where players could mount a skrim and fly in place with simulated wind, turns, and, most important of all, attacking clockwork opponents. Using this, players practiced *Artis Decerto* in flight, learning to perform midair flips, barrel rolls, horizontal leans, and an entirely new maneuver, known as the Drop, in which a player would fall flat onto the length of their skrim, their fingers curled over the front edge, reducing their target area and wind resistance, and effectively transforming themselves into missiles. In this posture, the player was able to use his or her skrim as a shield, deflecting spells by pulling the leading edge upwards, forcing the spells to bounce off the bottom.

"Wow!" Gobbins cheered as Jazmine performed an impressive dropping barrel roll through a group of clockwork Bullies, complete with mechanical Cudgels. "Way to thread the needle, Jaz!"

"I gotta admit, James," Norrick said, shaking his head, "I wasn't buying into this whole *Artis Decerto* thing at first. But between the new magic we've been practicing and these crazy new moves, I think we might just have a chance to get into the tournament."

"Get into it nothing," Wentworth exclaimed, his eyes boggling behind his huge glasses. "We've got a chance to *win* that baby! Especially now that the Pixies and Igors have been knocked out of the playoffs! It's down to the Werewolves, Vampires, Zombies and us! And we haven't even started using any of these new moves yet!"

"Let's not get too confident," James warned despite his own cautious confidence. "It's one thing to do these maneuvers in the Gauntlet. It's another thing entirely to pull them off on the course. Besides, our next match is sudden death against the Zombies and *they've* been practicing in

the Gauntlet same as we have, thanks to the fact that we needed Zane and Professor Cloverhoof's help to build it."

"I watched them practice on it yesterday," Jazmine gasped, jumping off her skrim as Ralph halted the Gauntlet around her, "from the window on the upstairs landing. They aren't taking it all that seriously. They didn't use the flight pad at all."

"Graarph," Mukthatch agreed, hopping onto his skrim and piloting it into position for his own turn on the pad. "Wurgh raffwabffle."

"What'd he say?" James asked Norrick behind his hand.

"He says the Zombies' weakness is the fact that they don't take anything seriously. They prefer tricks and surprise to discipline and practice."

"Wow," Ralph said, blinking. "He said all that?"

"Sasquatchian is a very economical language," Norrick replied, nodding wisely. "I've been taking it since grade school. They have a hundred words for dirt, but no word for quit. Kind of tells you everything you need to know about 'em, doesn't it?"

James nodded.

Later, on the night before the Bigfoots' last match against Team Zombie, James met Zane on the porch of Hermes Mansion.

"Did you try to talk to them about it?" he asked the blonde boy, who shook his head grimly.

"It's a pride thing," Zane explained in a low voice, glancing back at the house behind him. "Team Zombie hasn't been beat by the Foots since, like, forever. That tie game you handed them last match was bad enough. And this is a playoff death match! The winner goes on, the loser goes home! I can't just tell them, 'Hey fellas, why don't you throw this thing to the Bigfoots, eh? I can't tell you why, but it'll keep some girl you don't know from being sent to Fort Bedlam and who knows, maybe even save the universe from collapsing in on itself because of some missing thread! Whaddaya say?' Sorry James, you know I'm on board with you, but there's no way that Bludger will fly."

James shook his head in exasperation. "Can you, like, slip a dose of Weasley's Silly Serum into their morning coffees or something? Or hex some invisible weights onto their skrims?"

Zane looked aghast. "*Sabotage* the *Zombies*?" he hissed, mortified. "Look, mate, I'm on your side and all, but rule number one of Zombie House is that you never *ever* prank your own house." Zane stopped and glanced aside thoughtfully. "Well, actually, rule number *one* is to always keep the cellar door locked from the outside so the ghoul doesn't sneak upstairs at night and have parties with all the other house ghouls. *Boy*, do they make a terrible mess. And do they eat? Sheesh. Last time there wasn't anything left but a box of dried leech chews and half a jar of El Salsa Grenado. But not pranking your own house is *definitely* rule number *two*. Without a doubt."

"But...!" James began, but Zane cut him off with a raised hand.

"Sorry, James. I just can't do it. We Zombies may not have much of a code of ethics, but the few ethics we *do* have, we stick to like glue. Capiche? You guys'll just have to win it fair and square."

James sighed deeply and nodded. As he turned to leave, however, Zane tapped him on the shoulder.

"But I'll be rooting for you guys," he whispered with a crooked smile. "You can do it. Keep between Warrington and Hurst, eh? I can't tell you why, but if you do that—stick between those two like beetle butter between two slices of white bread—then you'll do just fine." He winked conspiratorially and then turned back to his house, whistling an innocent tune.

The afternoon of the match turned out to be bright and warm, resulting in a very exuberant turnout of spectators. The grandstands were packed to overflowing, crowded with waving banners and handmade signs. To James' surprise, there seemed to be nearly as many Bigfoot colours and banners as there were Zombie supporters. The two factions jostled amiably on the high rampart bleachers, competing against each other with small displays of firework spells in team colours.

"This is it, team!" Wood hollered as the players huddled around him atop the platform. His voice was nearly lost in the roar of the excited crowd. "I know this is a sudden death match, but don't let that spook you! We've played an amazing season and I am proud of each and every one of you! Do your best, keep it clean, and try to have fun! If we lose, we may be out of the playoffs, but we'll still have a better record than Team Bigfoot has racked up in over ten years! You're all winners in my book, eh? So let's keep our chins up! Ready?"

The team joined in, piling their hands atop Wood's outstretched fist. "*GooOO FEET!*"

As the team assembled along the platform edge, Wentworth moved alongside James, his skrim at his side.

"If I didn't know any better," he muttered under his breath, "I'd almost think Wood *expected* us to lose."

James glanced at the boy next to him. Wentworth looked up. "I'm just sayin'," he shrugged.

"Well, *I* expect us to win," James replied. "Remember, just keep an eye on Warrington and Hurst. If they line up..."

"Yeah, yeah," Gobbins agreed grimly from James' other side. "We squeeze in between them like Mother Newt chaperoning a Valentine's dance."

A sharp whistle pierced the air over the figure eight course. Professor Sanuye floated over the center ring in his official's tunic, his whistle protruding from between his teeth.

"Number Six Hippogriff," Jazmine announced, launching from the platform for the warm-up lap. The rest of the team began to stream out behind her, assembling into Hippogriff formation.

"This is it," Norrick called seriously, dropping his skrim and preparing to launch from the platform. "Sudden death, everyone! Do or die!"

"Do or die!" the others echoed, as if it were a battle cry. James joined them, feeling a drunken mixture of excitement, apprehension, and secret confidence. "Do or die! Let's go!"

One minute later, Sanuye blew a long note on his whistle. The match began.



Two hours later, Team Bigfoot was gathered in the Kite and Key, jostling raucously around two tables which they had pushed together.

“Victory!” Norrick cried, hoisting his Butterbeer. The rest mimicked his toast, making sure to shout loud enough for the Zombies gathered dourly in booths on the other side of the bar to hear. “Victory!” they cried jubilantly, clinking their mugs and tankards together, slopping their drinks all over the tables between them.

“It was a close one,” Gobbins admitted to James as the cheers broke up into enthusiastic chatter. “I was a little worried at halftime with them up by four points.”

James nodded and shrugged, but the truth was that he knew it had never really been a close match at all. One minute before the halftime whistle had blown, Team Zombie had succeeded in walloping home a string of quick goals ,thanks to the combined efforts of Warrington and Hurst, who, despite the Foothills’ best efforts, had managed to cluster into a piledrive formation, carrying all three Clutches between them and flanked by the remainder of their team.

James had fumed about his team’s failure to prevent the maneuver, but he also knew that piledrive formation was a once-in-a-match tactic. Team Zombie had been nervous about losing the match even then and had begun to resort to desperation maneuvers. Five minutes into the second half, Team Bigfoot had already regained the lead. Wentworth had replaced Mukthatch on goal, leaving Mukthatch to shadow Warrington for the rest of the game, his ape-like reach and intimidating demeanor easily preventing any repeats of the fabled piledrive maneuver. In the end, using a confident mixture of game magic and *Artis Decerto* aerobatics, Team Bigfoot had soundly defeated the Zombies by a score of eighty-two to sixty.

“We’re going to the tournament!” Norrick cried out exuberantly, and the rest joined in, hooting and hollering, but James was less confident. Even as his fellow teammates cheered, he looked around and saw a table near the fireplace surrounded by the slate grey sweaters and scarves of Werewolf House. Clayton Altaire sat at the head of the table, staring at James with a small crooked smile. As James watched, the older boy raised a hand and pointed discreetly at James. He mimed shooting him and mouthed the word ‘*pow*’. The rest of the Werewolves saw the gesture. They turned and grinned wickedly back at James, their eyes glittering narrowly.

James sighed, the celebration leaking out of his heart. *You may make it to the tournament, you little Squibs*, the Werewolves' grins seemed to say, *but then you'll have to face off against us, and we're a whole different cauldron of newts. We eat Squibs like you for breakfast.*

James looked away, not liking those secretive, confident grins. Instead, he looked toward the Zombies on the other side of the room, gathered truculently around their own tables. Zane sat among them, looking equally morose, and yet when he saw James, he winked and shrugged a little. Like the Werewolves' grins, Zane's gesture seemed to speak volumes. *Congratulations, pal*, the little wink seemed to say, *now comes the fun part.*

James rolled his eyes, bemused. Even Zane's gestures managed to be sarcastic.



During the following days, James, Ralph, and Zane struggled to formulate a plan. Barring any unforeseen disasters, it seemed that the Bigfoots would—amazingly enough—play in the final tournament match. For most of the team, this accomplishment was success enough. James, of course, had a different goal in mind. It was essential that the Bigfoots not only *meet* Team Werewolf in the tournament, but that they defeat them. Only then would Apollo Mansion relocate onto Victory Hill, replacing Ares Mansion and thus completing the dimensional keyhole. But how could it be done?

It would have helped if the Werewolves' record had been even slightly imperfect. Where Team Bigfoot (to no one's greater surprise than their own) had managed to scrape together a record of four wins and three losses, barely clinging to a second-place standing, Team Werewolf was as yet undefeated. Worse yet, all but one of the Bigfoots' victories had been breathtakingly close, including two technical wins by tie. The Werewolves, however, had easily dominated every match, usually leading by double digits at halftime and proceeding to send in their second-string players for the last quarter while the starters actually left the platform, descending to their locker cellar and changing out of their pads and jerseys. The sheer arrogance of it all added insult to injury and formed the final sting of the Werewolves' game of psychological warfare—a game they alone played with nearly eerie ease.

“*Every* team has a weakness,” Zane insisted, pounding the arm of one of the sofas in the Bigfoot game room. “Even the Wolves.”

"Probably, but nobody's found it yet," Ralph said with a sigh. "They just seem to play a totally solid game. No chinks, no weak links."

James shook his head as he looked down at the floor between the sofas. The disarmedillo waddled idly past a nearby coffee table, sniffing the carpet, two empty licorice soda bottles balanced amusingly on its plated back. Zane sat up and added his own empty bottle to the collection.

"That doesn't mean they don't *have* a weakness," he said darkly. "It just means they're hiding it behind all that stupid arrogance. Their best offense is psyching everyone out so much that they win even before the match starts."

"Maybe," James admitted. "But then again, maybe *that's* their weakness. Maybe they really aren't as good a team as everyone *believes* they are. Maybe Altaire and his goons have just succeeded in convincing everyone that the Werewolves are so good that the other teams just get nervous and throw the game. Has that ever occurred to you?"

Zane considered it. "It's a theory, at least," he acknowledged. "So you're saying that if you can convince the Foots that Team Werewolf is more bark than bite, then maybe you'll take the Wolves' best weapon right out of their paws?"

"Couldn't hurt," Ralph nodded. "Either way, right? I mean, psyching-out can work both ways. If it's true that Team Werewolf can psyche other teams into playing worse, then it's also true that we can psyche *ourselves* into playing even *better*. Stands to reason."

Zane pressed his lips together thoughtfully. "But you'll need more than words to convince your guys that the Werewolves are just a bunch of sheep in wolves' clothing. You'll need something concrete, something they can rally around. Some secret weapon or something, even if it's just a symbol."

"Like that stupid bronze statue that Team Werewolf rubs on their way to every match," Ralph concurred, becoming excited. "But different. Something that will really make the team believe they have an ace up their sleeve."

James was thoughtful, his eyes narrowed as the disarmedillo lumbered under his outstretched legs, knocking the bottles from its back. Zane and Ralph looked at him.

"What are you thinking?" Zane asked, raising his eyebrows.

James mused, "I'm thinking that maybe the Werewolves *do* have a weakness after all. I mean, besides their overconfidence."

"What's that?" Ralph asked.

James smiled slowly and a little wickedly. "Do you think that there is *anyone* on campus, apart from their own housemates, who *want* Team Werewolf to win the tournament?"

Zane blew a breath out through pursed lips. "After a decade of being undefeated? And after all the humiliations they've handed out for the last few seasons? Not likely. In fact, I'd bet that everyone in every other house would pay good money to see the Wolves get clobbered this year. Why?"

James was still smiling mischievously. "Do you think," he asked quietly, "that they'd be willing to help make it happen?"



It was a simple enough plan, and James admitted, somewhat grudgingly, that he was just the person to pull it off.

Two years earlier, during his first term at Hogwarts, James had learned something about himself. He was not like his father. This was not a bad thing, really (although for some time he had sorely believed it was). It did mean, however, that James had to find other methods to get things done. His father, as a young man, had succeeded by rushing pell-mell straight into the arms of danger, usually flanked only by his mates, Ron and Hermione. This had worked for him because he was, simply put, the child of destiny. He was Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.

James, on the other hand, was just a kid. His attempts to manage adventures entirely on his own had failed rather miserably. Like Team Bigfoot, James had only succeeded narrowly, often by the slightest of margins, and always with the help of the people around him. This had finally convinced him of the reality of the kind of person he was. Rather than attempting to manage things entirely on his own as his father had, James had learned (at least in a few instances) to ask for help.

He had first done this by asking the Gremlins to assist him, Ralph, and Zane in the great broomstick caper, when they had believed that Tabitha Corsica's broom had been the legendary Merlin staff in disguise. The caper had failed (in the fundamental sense that the broomstick had not, in fact, been the Merlin staff), but it had worked excellently in actual practice; James had succeeded in pilfering the broom, at least for a few minutes. Later, of course, James had asked Merlin himself to help them in ridding Hogwarts of the pesky (but dangerous) Muggle reporter, Martin Prescott. That, incredibly, had worked exceptionally well. Grudgingly, over the next year, James had learned that this was his fate. He was not a hero so much as he was a manager. He asked for help. Not always, of course, and probably not even as often as he should, but when he did, things seemed to work out much better.

Now, he was only slightly more comfortable with it. And yet, as he visited the first house on his list (it was Aphrodite Heights, up on the hill near the theater), he discovered that this task, unlike his previous experiences with asking for help, was going to be rather eerily easy.

"You bet," Ophelia Wright, captain of Team Pixie, nodded resolutely, making her blonde pigtails flop. "Those Werewolf stump-heads had the gall to play Winkles and Augers on their platform during our last match. By the fourth quarter, Professor Jackson wasn't even watching the game! He was watching his own players winkle an old Clutch around their platform! We'll do more than share our best spells with you. We'll show you how to use them! *That'll* teach those tasteless old Wolves to embarrass the Pixies."

Ten minutes later, James left Aphrodite Heights in a sort of stunned daze. Ralph walked next to him, his nose buried in a handwritten notebook, its pages crammed with hand-drawn illustrations and neat, back-slanting cursive, the 'i's all dotted with smiley faces and hearts.

"Wow," Ralph breathed, not looking up from the pages. "Those Pixies are only cute on the outside. This stuff is *ruthless*."

James nodded, but their work wasn't done yet. They still had three more houses to visit, and yet he approached the task with a renewed sense of purpose. Ophelia Wright had responded almost as if the two Bigfoot players were doing *them* a favor, rather than the other way around.

"Put them in their place," she'd said grimly as she walked them to the big gingerbread front door of Aphrodite Heights. "Knock them off their infuriatingly colourless grey skrims and tell them it's from Team Pixie, at least in part."

James had nodded, smiling crookedly. This was going far better than he'd expected.

By the end of the day, he and Ralph had procured the enthusiastic assistance of the team captains from every other house.

The Igors had agreed to give Team Bigfoot's skrims a secret pre-game boost, using a battery of technomancic enhancements that they had formulated over the previous few seasons and which had, up until now, been a carefully guarded secret. These enhancements, the Igor captain promised with a slightly maniacal (if practiced) laugh, would make the Bigfoots' skrims faster and more maneuverable than anything in the Werewolves' arsenal.

Warrington, the captain of Team Zombie, was still smarting from his team's loss to the Bigfoots, but with Zane's encouragement, this was easily offset by the Zombies long-term hatred of the Werewolves. He agreed to share his team's most effective offensive techniques with the Bigfoots, which was no small offering, considering that the Zombies had succeeded in scoring the most points against the Werewolves throughout the season.

James had been prepared to fetch Wentworth in order to guarantee an interview with the captain of Team Vampire, but it turned out that the captain was Anton Harding, the boy who had initially tried to prevent their entrance into Erebus Castle, and he had already heard about James and Ralph's mission. He headed them off as they made their way across the afternoon warmth of the campus.

"I hear you're looking for help from the other societies in beating Altaire and his Werewolves in the tournament," he said with no preamble.

James nodded and gulped. "Er, yes," he admitted. "We checked the Bigfoot team charter and saw that there's no rule against it. We just thought the other teams might, er, want to see the Werewolves finally get beaten after all these years. Fair and square, of course. Nothing underhanded."

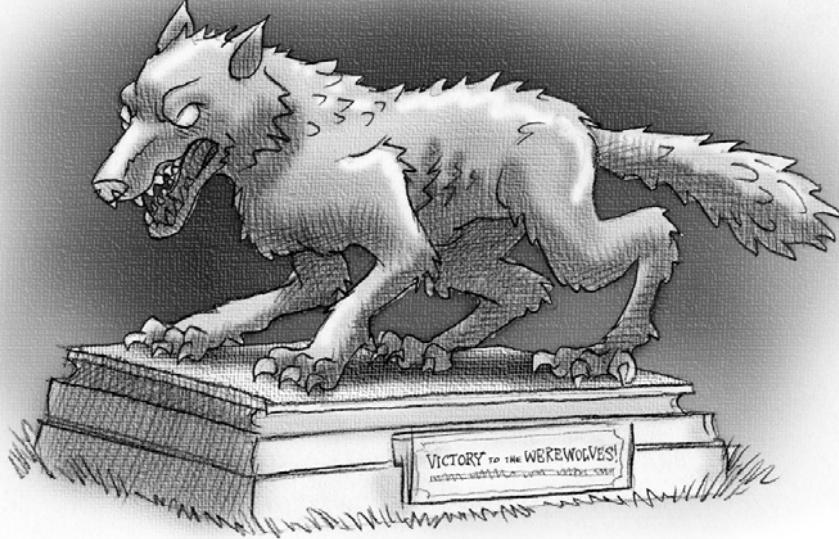
Harding's eyes narrowed. "Well, *that's* a shame," he scowled in disgust. "But I should have known that Team Bigfoot wouldn't have the guts to do anything *truly* evil to put those infuriating dogs in their place. I was willing to share with you our most secret game curses. Would you be willing to accept a few mild Plague Hexes at least?"

Ralph gave a smile that shocked James a little and then put an arm around Harding's shoulders. "Did you know," he said conspiratorially, "that I come from a little place known as Slytherin House? Plague Hexes are a bit of a specialty for us. Talk to me."

Harding met Ralph's grin. For the next twenty minutes, the three talked in low voices, hovering near the glinting orb of the Octosphere. At the end of it, both Ralph and Harding laughed. After a moment, James joined in, a bit nervously.

All the houses were backing them now. With their assistance, Team Bigfoot would be more formidable than they had ever been before and might never be again. James knew, however, that the real secret of their potential success was not in the technomancy-enhanced skrims or the expanded game magic or even the Vampires' dreadful game curses. The real secret was in the psychological boost that these things would give Team Bigfoot. The whole school was behind them, rooting for them, and offering them their best support. Apart from the members of Werewolf House, the entire school believed that the Bigfoots could win the tournament.

This, more than anything, was their secret weapon. Tentatively, James began to think that they might just pull it off.



20. ALBUS' STORY

Albus didn't hate Alma Aleron despite his outward jibes and complaints. Nor did he necessarily dislike life in Ares Mansion with his fellow Werewolves. In many ways, they were comfortingly similar to his mates back in Slytherin House. There was a familiar ruthlessness to them, a mingled sense of pride and ambition that Albus wholeheartedly shared. He had friends among the Wolves and even a few outside his own society. Like Zane, Albus was a likeable fellow. People gravitated toward him and got caught in his orbit, drawn by his infectious (albeit pointed) wit and his cynical insightfulness. There were times when Albus felt perfectly at home with his new mates and even this strange new school, which was so very unlike Hogwarts.

Furthermore, there was a refreshing candor to the Werewolves—a distinctly American straightforwardness that was somewhat shocking to his English sensibilities. Where the Slytherins (at least in his day and age) were rather political and subtle with their tactics, the Werewolves were fully overt about their aims. They were militant, power-hungry, arrogant, and merciless, and they were utterly unabashed about it. Albus appreciated the sheer bloody-minded bluntness of Clay Altaire, Olivia Jones, and the rest of the upperclassmen Wolves, even if their flinty-eyed zeal sometimes left him a little cold.

The one thing that ruined it all, of course, was the Werewolves' sense of nearly absurd patriotism. Albus understood patriotism—had expressed it himself in his irritation about coming to the States to begin with—but the brand of nationalism practiced by many of the older Werewolf students was off-putting at the very least. It had begun with the nickname 'Cornelius', apparently an American term for anyone with a British accent derived from some famous speeches given decades earlier by some Minister of Magic. Albus could live with that, he supposed. He himself had handed out more than a few derisive nicknames in his time, and knew that the best way to manage such a

thing was to embrace the nickname rather than eschew it. Consequently, he answered to the nickname as if it was a source of pride. After all, he *was* British and this Cornelius fellow *had* been Minister of Magic. These were hardly things to be ashamed of.

The Werewolves, however, seemed immune to the irony of Albus' willing acceptance of their sneering moniker. They viewed it as a weakness rather than a sort of backhanded boldness. The Werewolves, Albus learned, did not appreciate cunning or subtlety, at least outside of the battlefield. What they wished to see from their fellow Wolves was *fierceness*. They wanted Albus to bare his metaphorical teeth at them, to prove his toughness (and his adopted Americanness) by snarling at their jibes and even slashing back at them a little. By the time he realized this, however, it was too late to do anything about it. Like any wolf pack, the alpha dogs maintained their positions by stepping on the throats of the lesser animals. By playing it cool and subtle, Albus had allowed them to decide—erroneously—that he was *not* an alpha dog. The fact that he clung to his Britishness (and perhaps even more, his *Slytherinnes*) only cemented their opinion that he was an interloper.

As a result, Albus' initial rabid enthusiasm for his house and his mates had cooled to a brittle, grudging tolerance. He missed Slytherin House, where he was appreciated and (he had to admit it, at least to himself) revered a little. After all, he was the son of Harry Potter and he had been sorted into the house of Harry Potter's mortal enemy. If that wasn't delicious irony, then nothing was. The Slytherins, politick as they might be, understood irony. They relished it.

Thus, as each day passed, bringing Albus one step closer to going home to his mates, he became more and more discontent and restless.

He talked to James about it a little, but James couldn't really understand. James had Ralph and that insufferable git Zane Walker to hang out with just like always. Besides, James was obviously obsessed with some project or other, as he always seemed to be. Albus didn't know anything about it—had merely noticed his brother and his small circle of mates buried in hushed conversations and lurking around the campus like a bunch of self-important little berks—but he guessed that whatever it was, it had something to do with Petra Morganstern.

Albus supposed that he was slightly jealous of them. After all, Petra was his friend too, at least a little. She and her sister had lived in the Potter home for several weeks over the summer, and Petra and Albus had developed a sort of sharp-edged camaraderie. There was something decidedly *un-Gryffindor* about Petra, despite her house of origin. She could be surprisingly dark sometimes, both in her attitudes and her humor, and Albus had, to his own great surprise, truly liked her. He didn't feel the same way about the older girl that James did, of course. Everybody knew that James was completely sodden with puppy love for Petra. Albus, on the other hand, saw her as a younger, female version of his recently married Uncle George. To him, Petra was a sort of sister-in-arms, a cynical kindred spirit, even if she did tend to hide it all under a somewhat sugary *nice girl* exterior.

Albus didn't know if Petra really was guilty of cursing old Mr. Henredon or not. In his own way, he thought he knew her even better than James did, since James' opinion of her was rather hopelessly skewed by the rose-coloured glasses of infatuation. Albus understood that Petra may well have been the one to break into the Hall of Archives. He didn't know what all the ruckus was about it, really. So what if she had cursed some old Muggle curator and diddled around with some

mysterious relic at the bottom of the Archive? Even if she had done it, Albus figured she'd had a good reason for it.

He also understood—instinctively if nothing else—that if the American wizarding authorities tried to put Petra in prison, they might have a harder time holding onto her than they'd expect. Albus had some experience dealing with singularly unique, magical individuals. His father, after all, was the great Harry Potter. Albus knew that there was something unusual about Petra, something that was both quietly powerful and (perhaps even more importantly) deeply fierce. No matter what happened with her and that pipsqueak arbiter, Keynes, Albus had a feeling that Petra would manage to stay in charge of her own destiny. And Izzy's as well.

"Hey Cornelius," Altaire called as Albus returned to Ares Mansion one evening, interrupting him just as he began to tramp up the wide staircase. "Your brother and his slab of a buddy toddled by to see you."

Albus stopped, surprised. He peered over the banister at Altaire, who lounged in the main parlor with some older Werewolf students pretending to study, nipping Firewhisky from a bottle they kept hidden behind the couch.

"James came here? What'd he say?"

Altaire shrugged indulgently. "Who knows? He and his little Bigfoot pal shook in their capes when I met them at the door and told them you weren't here. I suggested they beat it before I taught them a little respect. Sorry if I ruined teatime or something." He grinned maliciously and nudged the girl next to him. She smirked crookedly.

Albus rolled his eyes and turned away, trudging up the rest of the stairs.

He'd heard about James' errands around the campus that day. Lucy had corroborated the rumors at lunchtime. Apparently, James and Ralph Deedle were making the rounds to all the other societies, asking for a little help with the upcoming tournament match. He shook his head as he made his way to the second-floor landing and opened the door to the small sophomore dormitory room. It was just like James to traipse all over the campus with his hand out, begging for help, making *his* problem everyone *else's* problem. As irritating as the Werewolves could be, at least they understood the concept of self-respect. They'd either win or lose on their own two feet, and they'd do it with pride, no matter what.

Of course, in Albus' experience, the Werewolves *always* won, so he couldn't be entirely sure how they'd react if they ever lost. He assumed that they'd accept it with the same stoic bitterness that they displayed in nearly every other case.

Albus plopped his knapsack onto his bed and threw himself down next to it. He propped his chin in his hands and stared out the tall window.

The fact was that it rankled him a little bit that James hadn't tried any harder to ask *him* for help. Truthfully, Albus knew that he hadn't given James any indication that he, Albus, would be willing to *offer* any help, but still. They were brothers, weren't they?

Deep down, despite all of his bravado and his apparent society loyalty, Albus sort of wanted to see the Bigfoots win the tournament. Not just because James was part of the team and not in the least because the Foots were the celebrated underdogs. Albus was not the sort of boy to be moved by the plight of the underdog. The fact was, Albus was uneasy about the apparently unstoppable nature of Team Werewolf.

It had started a few months earlier, right before Christmas.

Albus was bundling up to follow the team out to Pepperpock Down for a match against Igor House when Altaire had stopped him.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, where do you think *you're* running off to?" the bigger boy had demanded, placing a hand on the middle of Albus' chest and pushing him slightly back into the foyer.

"I'm going to the match," Albus replied, resisting—with some difficulty—the urge to produce his wand and give Altaire a *shove* of his own.

Altaire shook his head impatiently. "No you aren't," he countered. "*You've* got a job to do. Don't tell me you forgot already."

Albus frowned wearily. "You're kidding? I have to do it *now*? But the match...!"

"I expect we'll manage to play the first half just fine without you in the stands waving your little Werewolf flag," Olivia Jones smirked, passing them as she strapped on her gauntlets.

"Everybody has to do their part," Altaire added condescendingly. "Our part is to go kick Team Igor's scrawny butts. *Yours* is to polish the silver so that we have something nice to eat with when we get back. It may not seem very important to you, Cornelius, but we'll be hungry when we get back. We'll deserve some nice shiny silverware. Right? What would happen if you toddled off to the match and shirked your duties? Why, we'd get back here and find nothing but tarnished, spotty old silver! How awful would that be?"

"Answer him, cadet," the Werewolf Keeper, a brute of a senior named Dunckel, commanded as he passed, bumping Albus with his shoulder.

"That would be pretty awful," Albus muttered, trying not to sound too sarcastic.

Altaire nodded. "It sure would. Now get to it. If you double-time it you may still make it for the second half of the game. And if you get there any earlier than that, I'll know you cheated and used magic. No magic for house chores! You know the rules."

"Yeah," Albus said darkly, stripping off his scarf and throwing it over the hook by the door. "I know the rules."

Altaire had already dismissed Albus, however. He smacked himself on his padded shoulders, first his right and then his left, let out a hoarse bark of animal-like enthusiasm (which was answered by the rest of the team as they made their way through the huge front door), and trotted down the main steps into the cold afternoon.

Unlike the rest of the houses, Team Werewolf lived close enough to Pepperpock Down that they got ready for their matches in their own house, ignoring the locker cellar beneath their platform until the end of the match. Albus watched grimly as the team ran single file down the steps and along the path, barking and yawping at the early yellow moon. As they passed the bronze statue of the crouched werewolf, they patted it on the muzzle, as if for good luck. It was a tradition that was very nearly a compulsion. Albus shook his head. He was not superstitious enough to believe in luck. He believed in making his own luck.

Or not.

Still frowning to himself, he turned back to the main hall of Ares Mansion and made his way to the dining room and the silver hutch therein.

He used magic to clean the silver, of course, despite the Werewolf House rules. It took all of three minutes. The next few minutes he spent grubbing up some old rags with silver polish and leaving them on the table just for the look of it.

There was a television in Ares Mansion. This had offended Albus a great deal at first—the idea of a telly at Hogwarts was utterly preposterous, of course—but Alma Aleron was not Hogwarts, and at times like this, he was secretly rather glad for the diversion. He used his wand to click on the set and plopped full length onto the couch.

There were dedicated wizarding television channels in the States and Albus watched one of them disconsolately, biding his time until he felt he could head out to the match without raising any suspicions. The program was a sort of chat show. The host, a wizard in orange pinstripe robes, was interviewing some bloke from the Crystal Mountain about the persistently missing Muggle senator. The working theory, apparently, was that the senator, whose name was Filmore, was still alive, and was being held by the Wizard's United Liberation Front at a secret location. The man from the Crystal Mountain was impressively slick and cool, wearing a slate grey suit and a burgundy ascot. *Former Werewolf House man*, Albus thought with a mixture of pride and annoyance.

“According to some experts, the new head of the W.U.L.F. is a woman,” the man said, his tone grave. “She replaces the former leader, Edgar Tarrantus, who preferred to be a rather public figure despite his group’s clandestine nature. This new leader, however, has maintained a remarkably low profile, and we know almost nothing about her. She simply seems to have appeared out of thin air, wresting control of the group away from its founders and taking it, some say, into dangerous new directions.”

“And what does this bode for the Muggle senator Filmore,” the host asked meaningfully, leaning slightly forward on his chair.

The man in the grey suit shrugged. “If he is still alive, then we have to assume that the plan is to Obliviate and *Imperio* him. He may then be released back into the Muggle power structure, probably with some fabricated story to explain his absence. Assuming that this succeeds, we must expect that he will then act upon the will of his former captors.”

“And what might that be?” the host asked, cocking his head.

"The aims of the W.U.L.F. are quite well-known," the grey suited man replied easily. "Complete equality between the wizarding and Muggle worlds. The first step would probably be some disclosure of the magical world, at least in a relatively small way, just to prepare the Muggle public for the changes to come. Of course, this is just conjecture at this point."

The host nodded dourly. "Noble goals indeed, even if their methods are a little questionable. Recent opinion polls show that nearly fifty-two percent of American witches and wizards are in favor of complete magical revelation to the Muggle world. Any ideas why the W.U.L.F. and their mysterious new leader have waited so long to act? After all, the senator has been missing for several months, now."

"It may be that they are on the run," the interviewee answered breezily. "International authorities are working with the Magical Integration Bureau to track them down, and there are rumours that the international agencies involved have acted imprudently, allowing the W.U.L.F. time to relocate. There are even suspicions that *some* of the international police are secretly involved with the W.U.L.F., either working with them or, more likely, attempting to take over the group for their own nefarious purposes."

"Skrewt poop," Albus said disgustedly, sitting up on the couch and flicking his wand at the telly. It popped off with a short squawk. "Bloody malcontents and ingrates. It'd serve you all right if Dad just gave up and went home. Leave you all in the lurch with your stupid W.U.L.F. and your bleedin' opinion polls."

He got up, pocketed his wand, and stalked toward the door, not caring if he got to the match early or not. For the moment, Albus figured Altaire could stuff his silver where the nargles didn't bite. He grabbed his scarf and slammed the front door on his way out.

It was virtually dark by now and Albus could hear the whoop and roar of nearby Pepperpock Down even as he made his way along the front path. He passed the glinting bronze statue of the crouched Werewolf. The plaque embedded into the statue's base was just readable by the light of the full moon:

VICTORY TO THE WEREWOLVES!

Gift of Mr. Stafford N. Havershift, Wolfpack Booster Troop Chairman, Class of 1992

"Sod off, Havershift," Albus grumped. "You *and* your stupid statue."

A moment later, he stopped in his tracks as a thrill of surprise scuttled up his back. Slowly, wide-eyed, he turned back to the snarling bronze shape.

It hadn't moved. And yet Albus was quite sure that it had just growled at him. He frowned at the crouched shape. Its bared teeth glinted in the moonlight. Its amber eyes caught the dusky light and seemed to glow faintly. Albus was about to continue on his way when the sound came again—a sort of tiny, barking growl. It was almost too quiet to notice, but it was definitely coming from the statue. With some trepidation, Albus crept closer to the statue. The noise of nearby

Pepperpock Down echoed across Victory Hill. A cheer erupted suddenly from the grandstands. Albus concentrated on the bronze statue, resisting an irrational fear that the frozen shape would suddenly spring to life and pounce upon him, snapping its jaws, its amber eyes flashing.

It was making noises.

They were so quiet, so faint, that Albus had to place his ear directly in front of the bared muzzle, straining to listen, but there was no question about it. More of the faint barking growls sounded and Albus suddenly recognized them. He'd heard the same sounds less than half an hour earlier as Team Werewolf was making their way to the match. It was his own team, barking in triumph at a scored goal. He heard them through the mouth of the bronze statue, as if on some secret magical wireless frequency. And then, tiny but recognizable, he heard their voices.

Nice shot, Lantz!

Knocked her clean off her skrim!

All right team, pincer formation! Let's take it to 'em again!

Steal that Clutch from 'em! That's more like it!

Albus recognized the voices: Altaire, Jones, and all the rest. As he listened, he heard the roar of the crowd as well, coming both from the statue's snarling mouth and the air high overhead. There was no question about it: he was hearing the match as it happened—hearing everything his teammates said to each other like a magical play-by-play.

He stepped back and stared at the statue. The amber eyes glowed faintly and Albus wondered if perhaps it *wasn't* the collected light of the full moon that he saw glinting in those yellow orbs. Perhaps they were glowing on their own, powered by the same secret magic that connected the statue to the match even as it played on less than a hundred yards away.

And if it was connected to the match, was the match somehow connected to *it*? Albus knew very well that while game magic was allowed in Clutchcudgel, *outside* magic was strictly forbidden. Nothing outside the boundaries of the figure eight course was permitted to influence the match in any way.

And yet...

Albus shook his head slowly, still frowning at the bronze statue. 'VICTORY TO THE WEREWOLVES', the plaque on its base read. Albus couldn't help wondering.

Was that merely a slogan? Or, perhaps—just perhaps—was it an incantation?

He didn't know. But he meant to find out.

For now, he turned and ran the rest of the way to the nearby grandstands, his breath pluming behind him in the cold, dark air.



It took less than a week for Albus to work out the secret of the Werewolf statue.

No doubt James would have been amazed by this (and later was, when Albus told him about it), but his cousin Rose would not have been surprised at all. While Albus was mainly known among his family as a rather sharp-tongued rogue and a bit of a malcontent, he was also, deep down, a very sharp boy with excellent instincts. Rose recognized these qualities because she had them herself. In fact, the main difference between the two of them was that Rose, like her mother, loved to read and had therefore supplemented her innate brightness with a wealth of knowledge. Albus, unfortunately, hated to read, thus his natural intelligence had been rather starved of the fuel it needed to thrive. For this reason, it was easy for those who knew him (including Albus himself) to conclude that he was a bit thicker than his brother and sister, despite his verbal wit. The truth, however, was rather the reverse.

The first thing Albus did was research a certain Mr. Stafford Havershift, whose generosity was apparently responsible for the statue that stood in front of Ares Mansion.

This proved to be rather easier than Albus could have hoped. The hall outside of the Ares Mansion dining room was dominated by a large glass trophy case packed with plaques, photos, newspaper clippings, and assorted memorabilia. One entire section of the case had been dedicated to Mr. Havershift, whose face smirked crookedly from a large framed photo in the center.

He was an almost absurdly good-looking man, with a prominent cleft chin, thick salt-and-pepper hair, a chiseled nose, and bright green eyes. A cursory glance around the nearby shelves told Albus quite a lot. The man had played Clipper for Team Werewolf throughout his school career some twenty years earlier and had lead the team to a series of championships. According to the newspaper clippings, Havershift had been both an excellent athlete and a dedicated student, excelling at Potion-Making and Precognitive Engineering.

Albus wondered for a moment if the man had gone on to play professional Clutchcudgel, but then his eyes fell upon another newspaper clipping near the top right of the case: '*Accident Sidelines Star Werewolf*'. The moving black-and-white photo that accompanied the article showed two Clutch players colliding hard in midair, spinning out of the center ring with their pads and goggles flying. Albus scanned the first few lines of the article, gleaning just enough to learn that Havershift's right wrist had been shattered in the collision, struck by the other player's skrim. Apparently, there had been conjecture that the other player, a boy named Benoit from Vampire House, had deliberately struck Havershift in an attempt to remove him from the match.

Deliberate or not, the result was the same: Havershift's wrist had been healed as well as possible, but he had sustained permanent damage to the tendons of his hand, dramatically reducing his ability to use a wand. In one fell swoop, his career as a Clutchcudgel athlete had been ruined.

Regardless, the team had apparently gone on to victory and had granted Havershift a Most Valuable Player award, despite the bandages that still wrapped his wrist.

As Albus scanned the rest of the case for more clues, a shadow fell over him. Glancing up, he saw Professor Jackson, President of Werewolf House, standing over him, his dark brow steely as always.

"It's good to see you taking an interest in house history, Mr. Potter," the tall man said stoically.

Albus nodded. "Yeah, er, I've been walking right past this case for almost a whole year and I never really stopped to look at it." He glanced back at the glass shelves and pointed at the large framed photo. "You know anything about this bloke?"

"Stafford Havershift?" Jackson said, smiling a little incredulously. He chuckled and shook his head. "Of course, being from England, you might not be quite as familiar with him as the rest of us are. Mr. Havershift is the founder of Pandora Potions, the country's largest elixir and potion-fabricating facility. His products are shipped the world over, everything from hair-colouring tonics to magical acids used by the military. I daresay you've probably got some of his products in your own toilet."

Albus shrugged. "Perhaps. So he's kind of a big deal here at Werewolf House, eh? Him being a former Werewolf and all."

"Indeed he is," Jackson nodded, turning serious. "His perseverance in the face of adversity is an example to us all. As a Clipper for Team Werewolf, he led us to our first string of tournament victories in many years. I was President of Werewolf House in that time as well and I remember it quite vividly. After his unfortunate accident, he swore that he would devote himself to the support of the team for his entire life, regardless of his inability to play. He graduated, founded Pandora Potions with the help of his father, and became a global success. And yet, despite his wealth and his international business obligations, he still finds time to stay involved here at Alma Aleron. He was chairman of the Werewolf Booster Troop for many years. Just over a decade ago, he donated the bronze werewolf statue you've seen standing before this very house."

"Is that so?" Albus replied evenly.

"He came for the dedication of it," Jackson added, straightening his back and nodding proudly. "It was a glorious day, attended by alumnus from decades past. There had to have been three hundred people on the slope of Victory Hill, which we had just regained after a very impressive tournament victory over Team Pixie. Mr. Havershift asked the current Clutchcudgel team to come forward so that he could have his picture taken with them and the statue. 'Stroke its muzzle,' he told them as they gathered around the statue, and I can still remember the pride in his smile, the twinkle in his eyes. 'Stroke it and see if it brings you victory,' he told them. That was the beginning of the tradition you yourself have surely witnessed. Am I correct, Mr. Potter?"

Albus nodded slowly, turning back to the smiling man in the photograph. It was a moving photograph, of course. In it, Havershift's grin was smug, confident, even a little mean.

Albus' instincts were clicking neatly into place. He didn't know as much stuff as Rose, but he was quick.

Here was a man, Stafford Havershift, whose chance at a senior-year tournament victory had been stolen away from him, along with much of the use of his right hand—his *wand* hand. This did not stop him, however. It barely even slowed him down. In classic Werewolf House fashion, the man apparently forewent wand magic and immersed himself into his second love: potion-making. Driven and probably ruthless, he succeeded wildly, all the while simmering in anger about what had been taken from him, about that last tournament victory that he had been unable to taste. In response, he had vowed to support Team Werewolf until his dying day—to help them achieve as many more of those victories as possible—and as a token of that support, he had donated a large bronze statue with mysterious amber eyes.

Was it possible that no one else had figured it out? Or did they know—at least a little—and just pretend not to? To Albus, it seemed very obvious: a wealthy team supporter who just happens to be an international potion-making expert gives the team a talisman for them to rub before every game and from that day on... they never lose. Coincidence?

"You've got to be kidding me," Albus mumbled under his breath, peering out the front window at the statue on the lawn, glinting in the moonlight. "I mean, seriously. *Nobody* is *that* good."

A few days later, as he was coming home from classes, Albus angled over toward the statue. He glanced furtively around and then peered closely at the amber eyes set into the statue's head just over the snarling muzzle. He saw his own reflection in them, hazy but bright, tinted golden. Tentatively, he reached out and touched the cold metal of the wolf's nose. It was skillfully cast, both soft and hard under his fingertips, worn bright by the hands that had rubbed it over the years. Feeling a slight shudder, Albus stroked his palm along the wolf's carved muzzle. A moment later, he retreated into the house, virtually running up the steps to his dormitory.

Once inside, he slammed the door and hurried to his bed. He placed his knapsack onto the bed, unzipped it, and rummaged inside until he found a sheet of light pink parchment, nearly as thin as tissue. He had just come from Potion-Making class with Professor Baruti and had secretly nicked the flimsy bit of parchment from the stash in the Potions closet. Among the Potions students, the pink parchment sheets were known as 'Teach-cheats' because of the way Professor Baruti used them to measure the ingredients of the class projects. He'd merely dip one corner into their cauldrons, examine it critically, and then suggest more eye of newt or a pinch less powdered spider bile.

Carefully, Albus lay the thin parchment onto his right hand, which was still cool from the metal of the bronze statue. With his left hand, he pressed the Teach-cheat hard against his palm. He waited ten seconds, counting slowly under his breath, and then drew his hands apart again. He carried the sheet of pink parchment to the window so he could examine it in the sunlight.

Slowly, faintly, cursive handwriting began to curl out on the paper, as if written by an invisible hand. Albus read the words as soon as each one became clear.

Peppermint oil (trace)

Powdered slagbelly toenail (133 particles)

Essence of eel (minuscule)

Wreakramble root (degraded; 0 potency)

Albus leaned over the parchment, frowning at the words. He could trace the origins of all of these ingredients. Most of them were remnants from his recent Potions class and his lunch prior to that. The Wreakramble root was from last week, when Professor Baruti had taken the class to Shackamaxon for a special lesson with the native woman, Madam Ayasha. Albus reminded himself that he should probably wash his hands a little more often. He sighed. The Teach-cheat didn't seem to have picked up anything from the bronze statue outside.

But then, very faintly and slowly, another line began to write out on the tissue-like parchment. Albus leaned over it again, straining to make out the blurry words.

Composite: Felix Felicis (derivative hybrid; memory)

Albus very nearly gasped. His eyes widened as he stared down at the parchment and its faint words. He knew what 'memory' meant in potions terms. It meant that there wasn't any detectable remnant of the listed ingredient, but a sort of halo or aura of it remained, imprinted onto the parchment like an echo.

"Felix Felicis," he whispered to himself, awed. A moment later, a crooked smile crept onto his face and he shook his head slowly. He was familiar with the substance, although he'd never actually encountered any of it in real life.

"It's probably in those amber eyes," he mused aloud. "After all, it's a liquid, isn't it? It might be infused in the metal as well, but there'd have to be a store of it somewhere inside, otherwise, the potion memory would be useless."

Albus narrowed his eyes. He collected the used Teach-cheat, folded it up, and stuffed it into the inside pocket of his slate grey blazer. He wasn't entirely sure what he'd do with what he'd learned, but he was glad of it nonetheless. Maybe he'd tell James about it. Not that it would do any good, of course, but it would feel good to be able to reveal such a juicy bit of house gossip.

Felix Felicis, he thought, smiling ruefully. *Better known as Liquid Luck.*



Albus might have told James that very night if it hadn't been for the arrest of Petra Morganstern.

In retrospect, both James and Albus understood that that had been the event that set everything fully into motion, like a lever being pulled and starting up a sort of magical merry-go-round, one that starts slowly, but gradually spins faster and faster, becoming an unstoppable blur.

They were walking to the library after dinner in the cafeteria, Albus, James, Ralph, Zane, and Lucy, the Tuesday before the final Clutchcudgel tournament match, when the word came down. A rabble of voices wafted into the early summer air, distracting Albus from the Quaffle he and Ralph had been tossing around. Ralph's toss struck Albus in the chest and bounced to the ground, unseen, as the gathering turned toward the increasing noise.

"It's that girl!" someone called out in a sort of hushed shout. "The one that cursed Mr. Henredon! They've finally convicted her!"

"But why are they bringing her here?" a Vampire boy asked, trotting past Albus, heading to join the gathering crowd.

"Petra?" Ralph asked, turning to look at James and Zane. "Did you hear anything about this?"

James shook his head, his face growing alarmed. "No. Not a thing! Come on!"

As one, the group broke into a run, Albus and Lucy following in the rear. By the time they reached the throng of students, a commanding voice rang out from the center, overruling the babble.

"Everyone please stand back," the voice said, its tone one of unquestioned authority. Albus saw a very severe man in a dark grey tunic and short vest, his hands raised. The left hand was held palm out, the right clutched his wand. "For your own safety and for the security of the campus, return immediately to your houses and classrooms. Anyone caught interfering with Wizarding Court affairs, even by accident, will be prosecuted. Am I clear?"

The last was not really a question and the set of the man's face made that fact very obvious. Students began to fall back, although none seemed in any hurry to return to their houses and classrooms. As the mob broke apart, Albus saw a tight assembly of men and women dressed in more of the grey tunics and vests, their faces all nearly expressionless. The arbiter, Albert Keynes, was among them, smiling faintly, his hat pulled tightly down over his bald head. The troop began to

walk slowly toward a large building—the campus medical school—levitating something carefully between them. Albus realized what it was at the same moment that James and the rest did.

“Petra!” James said, nearly groaning. He began to move forward again, reaching for his own wand, but Ralph and Zane both grabbed a shoulder and held him back, their faces pale and grave.

Petra Morganstern floated upright in the center of the gathered witches and wizards, her head down, her hair hanging like a dark curtain over her face. Albus guessed by the dangle of her arms and the loose curls of her fingers that she was unconscious and felt his own pang of mingled pity and fear. Her bare feet dangled six inches over her shadow as she floated along the footpath, suspended in the center of no less than eight pointing wands.

“Petra!” James called again, as if he meant to wake her. Albus knew it was a futile effort. She wasn’t merely asleep. She had been Stunned into unconsciousness. Probably it had been the only way the court officials could apprehend her. Still, it hurt his heart a little to see it. It was a bit like seeing a noble dragon declawed and defanged, or a captured warrior princess with all of her hair cut off. There was something shameful about it and something rather deeply frightening. Not just because Petra was so silent in her unconsciousness, but because Albus knew that they wouldn’t be able to keep her unconscious forever. Eventually, she would wake up.

Slowly, carefully, the gathered court policemen and women maneuvered Petra’s body into the wide front doors of the Medical College. Keynes held one of the doors open for them, smiling that infuriating, smug smile. Inside, Albus knew, were potions that could place someone into a deep sleep, virtually dreamless.

But they won’t be able to keep her unconscious forever, Albus thought again, and shuddered faintly. Eventually, Petra would wake up. Perhaps Izzy would be gone by then, spirited off to her new home in the Muggle world, her memory of Alma Aleron, the magical world, and Petra herself completely erased. Perhaps they would have succeeded in imprisoning Petra by then, for all the good it might (or might not) do. Unlike James, Albus didn’t know that Petra was a sorceress, but he sensed nonetheless that she was no typical witch. Eventually, sometime, Petra *would* surely wake up. It was inevitable.

And when she did, Albus was quite sure of one thing: when she woke up, she would be very, very angry.



21. UNLIKELY ALLIANCES

“*Petra!*” James called, not even feeling Ralph and Zane’s hands on his shoulders, holding him back. Distantly, he was aware that he had produced his wand from his robes, was raising it as if he meant to attack Albert Keynes and his troop of court officials. It was preposterous, of course, but for the moment, he was beyond such practicalities. They had taken her, had stunned her unconscious like some sort of wild animal, and were dragging her away for imprisonment.

The doors of the Medical College swung slowly shut, cutting off the view of the pathetically hovering young woman and her cadre of guards. Keynes watched James through the gently closing doors, his expression sadly patronizing. *Did you really think I wouldn’t learn the truth?* His gaze seemed to say. And then, with a soft click, the doors closed.

“No,” James groaned. “It’s not supposed to happen this way. They weren’t supposed to convict her yet! We’re so *close*!”

“It’s not over yet,” Zane said quietly, seriously, finally releasing James’ shoulder. “We can still set things to rights.”

Ralph nodded. “Yeah, it isn’t over yet.”

James barely heard them, however. He could feel the invisible silver thread that connected him to Petra. It was cold, flowing down the center of his arm like a vein of ice, filling his head with murky visions and shreds of dreams, broadcast directly from Petra’s sleeping mind. She was

dreaming of her capture, replaying it over and over. James caught phantom glimpses of his own parents on the street outside their flat, helpless and angry. Lily was there, standing on the footpath next to Izzy. They were holding hands. Both of them looked shocked, disbelieving. In the center of the street, Keynes and his crew called Petra out, surrounding her, raising their wands toward her. He heard Petra's own voice in her memory, confused and dismayed, claiming that she would come quietly, that it was all a mistake...

It isn't a mistake, Keynes had said blandly, his own wand trained unflinchingly on her. *And you certainly will come quietly.*

There were flashes then, coming from many directions at once. Petra had tried to fight their force, but she hadn't been prepared. It was too sudden, and there'd been too many of them. Blackness had overtaken her then, and in her unconscious mind, the scene began to play over again, like a needle skipping on an old record.

Anger swelled in James' chest, overwhelming him. Before he knew it, he was running, darting toward the Medical Center, his wand still in his hand, gripped hard enough to emit red sparks from its tip. He heard Zane and Ralph call out to him again followed by the alarmed cries of both Albus and Lucy, but those things didn't matter. He followed the invisible silvery thread, chasing it like a beacon.

He burst through the doors of the Medical College and bolted through the lobby, his footsteps echoing loudly on the marble floor. He made it only a few paces before a burst of light startled him. His wand sprang from his hand and clattered to the floor, spinning off into the hall.

"Leave it," a voice commanded quickly, even as James scrambled after it. James stopped and spun around, panting. Albert Keynes was standing in a corner just inside the main doors, his own wand raised comfortably, as if he had merely been waiting for James.

"Good choice," Keynes said, unsmiling. "I don't blame you for being upset, young man, but I would hate to see you do anything rash. You really must learn to control your emotions."

"She's not guilty!" James said, almost shouting in rage and frustration. "You *must* know that!"

Keynes cocked his head pityingly. "I'd advise you to leave now, Mr. Potter. I will turn your wand over to the Chancellor, from whom you may collect it at a later time, once you have calmed yourself."

"She didn't do it!" James repeated, advancing on Keynes, his hands opening and closing at his sides, helplessly empty.

"Ms. Morganstern is guilty, Mr. Potter," Keynes said calmly, his voice almost infuriatingly bland and quiet. "I have exhausted every possibility of her innocence. It is my job. Justice must be served."

"Who'd you talk to?" James demanded, shaking his head in fury. "Whoever they are, they lied!"

Keynes raised his chin slightly, his pale face growing stony. "Beware what questions you ask, my young friend," he said coolly. "You may get answers you do not wish to hear."

"You don't know anything!" James spat, stopping in the center of the foyer. Tears of frustration pricked the corners of his eyes, but he willed them back. "You *can't* know anything. Whatever you've heard, it's all lies!"

"I fear," Keynes said, his voice so low and quiet that James had to strain to hear him, "that it is *you* who have been lied to, Mr. Potter. Lied to by Ms. Morganstern herself."

James' face heated in an angry blush, almost as if he knew that Keynes was right. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said, dropping his own voice.

"I *know* what happened at Morganstern Farm," Keynes said slowly, his eyes boring into James. "Do you?"

"I know enough," James said, his cheeks still burning. "I know that she escaped from an awful life with her stepmother. Her sister too."

Keynes was shaking his head gravely. "You know what Ms. Morganstern wishes you to know. But she has kept the worst of it from you."

"And what's the worst of it—" James demanded, but Keynes was answering already, interrupting him, his words calculated to cut like a razor.

"Ms. Morganstern *killed* her stepmother," Keynes said carefully, making certain that James heard every word. James stared at him dumbly, and Keynes went on, drawing a sad little sigh. "She was a Muggle woman, powerless and helpless to fight back against such ferocity. Ms. Morganstern killed the woman using magic that was both stunning and inexplicable. She used a tree to do it. It sounds rather incredible, doesn't it? Apparently, Ms. Morganstern brought the tree to life, forced it to collect her stepmother, and then commanded it to drown her in a nearby lake. Worse, she did it within sight of the woman's own daughter, Izabella Morganstern. I scarcely believed it myself, but the evidence of the scene of the crime corroborates the story quite convincingly. The crater where the tree once stood is still there. And, of course, the witness is *very* persuasive."

When James tried to speak, his voice came out in a dry croak. "*What* witness?"

Keynes pressed his lips together thoughtfully, and James assumed he wouldn't answer, but then Keynes met his gaze again. "A witch," he replied very quietly. "You couldn't possibly know her. She lived in the area at the time, and was given to morning walks around the lake in question. She is a lover of nature, you see, and water in particular. She strove to remain hidden during her morning strolls out of fear of being arrested for trespassing since the lake was a part of Morganstern Farm. Still, her conscience bade her to tell me what she witnessed. She sought me out, in fact. Had it not been for her, and for the veracity of her story, Ms. Morganstern might well have gotten away with the murder she committed that morning. And as you can imagine, this charge only further convinced me of the truth of Mr. Henredon's allegations about what happened in the Hall of Archives. Why, without this woman's noble testimony, Ms. Morganstern *might* have gone scot-free."

James felt rooted to the floor, cold and solid as a statue. "Who was she?" he asked, again not expecting an answer, and yet fearing that he knew the answer nonetheless. Of course he did. He could picture her even now in his memory; long red hair, mostly hidden beneath a dark hood, glittering green eyes, unnaturally perfect, pale skin. *People tend not to notice me*, she had said on the night James first met her in the halls of the Aquapolis. *Unless they want to. Or unless I make them.*

"You do not know her," Keynes said, smiling condescendingly at James. "She is rather a secretive woman, perhaps even reclusive, although quite fetching, in her own way."

"She didn't even give you her name, did she?" James whispered, shaking his head. "She was that 'secretive', wasn't she? She was lying to you. She *had* to be."

"She was not lying," Keynes stated coldly, his eyes narrowing. "And she most certainly did give me her name, Mr. Potter. *Not* that it should matter to you. Her name..." He stopped, apparently considering whether he should go on. Finally he lowered his voice to a near mutter and went on. "Her first name is *Judith*. That's all you need to know. Now begone. Quickly, before I grow impatient."

James stood on the spot, however, his eyes wide, his brow knitted in consternation. *Judith*. He'd heard that name before. But where? His thoughts races as he tried to place it.

"Go!" Keynes commanded, flicking his wand again. James stumbled backwards as a mild force shoved him, buffeting him like a hot wind. He turned, ignoring Keynes' earlier instructions, and scooped up his wand from the floor. A moment later, he burst out into the warm air of the summer evening. Zane, Ralph and Lucy were waiting for him, wide-eyed and worried. James shook his head at them and headed across the campus, making his way to Apollo Mansion.

"What happened?" Zane demanded, trotting to catch up. "Did you see her?"

"No," James answered, walking fast, his mind spinning. "You lot go on up to the library. I... er, need to grab a few more books. I'll meet you there in a few minutes. We can talk about it then."

Ralph, Zane and Lucy agreed, albeit reluctantly.

James didn't really need any of his books, however. What he really needed was a few minutes to think. It was awfully difficult. Keynes words clanged like lead weights in James' memory, blotting out his own thoughts. Was any of it true? Did it change anything? Was it too late to help Petra now? Did Petra truly *deserve* his help? There were so many questions, and so few answers. James stalked along in a sort of numb fugue, barely seeing the campus as it unrolled around him. He was on the footpath that led up to Apollo Mansion when he finally, unexpectedly, remembered where he'd heard the name Judith before. He stopped, his brow furrowed, perplexed.

Judith had been the name of Merlin's betrothed love, back in the distant past, a thousand years earlier. James remembered Rose telling him all about it last year. Merlin had never married Judith, of course, due to a series of tragic events that had ended, finally, with her death at Merlin's own unknowing hand. Could there be some sort of connection?

James thought of the woman he had met in the corridors of the Aquapolis, and then later seen on the *Zephyr*, and then, later still, witnessed coming out of the Hall of Archives on the night of the attack, apparently in the company of Petra. Could she really be the same woman that had sought out Keynes and told him the terrible tale of what had happened at Morganstern Farm? Why would she do such a thing? How could she have known? Worse, was her testimony true? Had Petra truly killed her stepmother? And finally, somehow most nagging of all, was there some strange connection between this mysterious woman and the Judith of Merlin's tragic past?

It was impossible, of course. And yet James couldn't shake the suspicion. It buzzed around his head like a cloud of gnats, persistent and teasing. After all, it wasn't a particularly common name, Judith.

And then, out of nowhere, James remembered one more thing that Rose had told him: like the Morgansterns, Merlin's Judith had had a lake on her farm. In fact, it had formed the source of her nickname amongst the local villagers.

"*Judith*," James whispered to himself, musing. "The Lady of the Lake."

At the sound of his own words, a shiver coursed down James' back. Despite the evening's early summer warmth, it shook him all the way to his toes.



The final days of the school year began to run past quickly, draining away like grains of sand in a giant hourglass. Older students were most often seen buried in their books or studying in tense knots all over the campus. Final exams filled the last week's schedule, looming like vultures. James was amazed that the year had gone by so quickly. As he walked to classes, he occasionally glanced back at the Warping Willow, positioned near the southwest corner of the mall in the shadow of the guest house, and reminded himself that he would soon be using it to go back home for good. He was glad of this, and yet it all seemed so far away and remote—the Potter family home in Marble Arch, Kreacher, even Hogwarts, although he had seen the Gryffindor common room many times throughout the school year via the Shard.

Sometimes it seemed to James that it had only been a few days since his arrival at Alma Aleron. He remembered his first nights on campus, sleeping in the common dorm with its creepy clockwork monkey bellhop. He recalled (with a pang of embarrassment) the debacle of the Great Flag Switch escapade, which had destroyed his and Ralph's chances of joining Zombie House. Patches the cat had warned them about pledging at Zombie House, and he had apparently been right. The cat had suggested that they rush for Igor House. In retrospect, maybe he'd been onto something. James was fairly good at Technomancy despite his hesitance to admit it. Kneazle or not, Patches apparently knew stuff.

As the final week's exams wore on, a hard summer heat wave descended over the school, raising heat shimmers from the footpaths and making the new leaves hang limp from their branches, as if exhausted. Students loosened their ties and carried their blazers disconsolately under their arms or over their shoulders. Old-fashioned magical fans were placed in many of the buildings' entryways, their fat blades humming loudly, pushing the hot air around the halls and rustling the papers tacked to the bulletin boards. Students clustered in front of these fans, holding lackluster conversations or studying sheets of last-minute notes, furiously cramming for their impending exams.

Despite James' distractions, he felt confident that he was doing fairly well with his end-of-term exams. Through the Shard, Rose had offered, albeit tiredly, to help him, Ralph, and Zane to study since the Hogwarts school term lasted a bit longer than Alma Aleron's.

"*I would* ask you to return the favor in the next few weeks," she'd said, rolling her eyes. "But I expect that'd be a bit like asking for blood from a rock."

"Is that likely to be on the exam?" Ralph had asked suddenly, looking up from his bed, where he'd been poring over his Advanced Elemental Transmutation textbook. "We did butterflies from stones already. I don't remember blood from a rock." He flipped some pages while Rose sighed helplessly.

After studying late Thursday afternoon, James explained everything to Rose. Scorpius was not present, thankfully, otherwise he might not have.

"So what are you going to do?" Rose asked seriously, now standing next to the mantel in the Gryffindor common room so they could all keep their voices low. "I mean, if she's guilty, she's guilty. You can't stand in the way of justice."

James sighed deeply. He asked his cousin, "Do *you* really believe she's guilty?"

Rose shrugged, as if the question was too big to answer. "I don't know," she replied somberly. "Scorpius thinks she did it. So do Damien and Sabrina. I mean, we all *like* Petra and all, but it doesn't look very good, does it? That Arbiter bloke spoke to them, you know, and Ted too. Via Floo. He found out that they were all there when everything, er, *came down* at Petra's grandparents' farm. They told him to go hex himself, in so many words, but he already seemed to know everything. I hid behind the couch during the interview. He was one smug beast, I'll tell you."

"You got that one right," Zane commented from James' bed, where he lounged amidst a pile of books and notes. "Nobody should enjoy 'justice' as much as he does. He's just a bully with a badge if you ask me."

"So what do they plan to do with Petra?" Rose asked in a hushed voice.

Zane shrugged briskly. "She's still in the Medical College detention wing, only a few doors down from old Madame Delacroix, I hear. Lucy volunteers there sometimes, so she's been keeping us in the loop. Hardly anybody is allowed within fifty feet of Petra's door. They have guards posted all over the place, even though Petra's been unconscious the whole time. They gave her the poison apple treatment."

"Poison apple?" Rose blinked, frowning. "Is that a joke?"

"Nope," Zane said seriously. "Mother Newt makes 'em. One bite and you're out for good, or at least until someone says the magic word to wake you up. They had to give it to Petra by hand since she was already out cold when they brought her in. Until they know how to move her and lock her up, that's where she'll stay, sleeping under its spell. She may be powerful, but *nobody* wakes up from the poison apple on their own."

"What about Izzy?" Rose pressed. "Can't Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny just adopt her? Why's the court say she has to be Obliviated?"

"It's the law," James said darkly. "Izzy's a Muggle, remember? As long as she had a free and living magical relative, she'd have been allowed to live in the wizarding world. But now Petra's been convicted of a crime, so Izzy is on her own. If she was of age it would be a different story, but since she's not, the law says that she has to be sent back to the Muggle world."

"That's horrible," Rose said, hugging herself. Then, in a different voice, she asked, "Do you still plan to go through with your plans regarding the World Between the Worlds?"

James nodded. "Yes," he said stubbornly. "If we can win the tournament next Monday. And if we really can open the Nexus Curtain, once Apollo Mansion moves to Victory Hill and the cornerstones come together."

Rose shook her head slowly, watching her cousin's face through the glass of the Shard. "Are you really sure that's such a good idea? What if you do find your way into this place—this World Between the Worlds—only to find out that Petra really *did* do it?"

James' face hardened slightly. "If it really was Petra, then she was being tricked or used somehow. We'll prove it."

Rose was persistent. "But how can you *know* that?" she asked earnestly, almost whispering.

"Because of the silver thread," he answered, meeting her eyes. After a moment, he glanced around at Zane and Ralph. "You remember what I told you lot about that? From when Petra went over the back of the *Gwyndemere* and nearly fell into the ocean?"

Ralph nodded, remembering. "Yeah, you said that this magical silver thread appeared and connected the two of you. It's what saved her."

"Yeah," James concurred gravely. "Well, my dad talked to me about it afterwards. I don't remember everything he said, but I *do* remember this: he said that what happened between me and Petra was sort of like what happened between him and his mum, when she was willing to die for

him. It created some really deep kind of magic, protecting him, but also connecting him to Voldemort. When Petra fell off the ship..." He paused, searching for the words. After a moment, he drew a deep breath. "I was... willing to do whatever I had to do to save her. I was even willing to go over in her place although I was barely thinking about it at the time. It all happened too fast to think. Dad says that because I was willing to trade fates with Petra, it made that deep magic happen, just like it did between his mum and him. Only... different."

"Because you *didn't* die," Rose said, nodding slightly. "And yet, you saved her anyway. Somehow."

"That changes the deal, though, doesn't it?" Ralph suggested. "I mean, it's a little like cheating, er, isn't it?"

James looked at his friend. "Maybe it is. I don't know. The magic was so strong, so... unreal. But the thing is, where the deep magic connected my dad to Voldemort, back when he was a baby and his mum died for him, for me and Petra, it happened differently. It connected us, somehow. That silver thread, the one that appeared and saved her, connecting us so that I could pull her up... it's still there. When I'm close to her... and sometimes even when I'm not... I can sense her on the other end of it. I can, sort of, feel echoes of her thoughts and dreams. It isn't like I can read her mind or anything. But I can feel the shape of her thoughts. And probably vice versa too. One thing I know for sure is that regardless of what Keynes and the rest all say, Petra believes she is innocent. She is really and truly convinced that she didn't break into the Hall of Archives *or* curse Mr. Henredon. In her mind, she's totally innocent." He paused, and frowned thoughtfully. "At least, she believes she's innocent of that."

Rose looked very serious on the other side of the Shard. Her brow was low, knitted on her forehead. "James," she said softly. "I'm afraid to say this, but... that's a little crazy."

James blinked at her. "Well," he countered defensively, "maybe. But it's true!"

"Silver thread or not," Zane announced, climbing to his feet. "I just want to see how this whole dealio works out. We've put too much into this to stop now."

"That's hardly a good reason," Rose said, but Zane approached the Shard and patted it, as if he meant to pat her on the head.

"Rose, love, you're a girl. You wouldn't understand. There's a sort of inertia to these things. We got the magic horseshoe. We figured out the riddle of where the Nexus Curtain is. There's no *way* we can stop now. The weight of our own curiosity would crush us. Is that what you want? For us to be crushed by our own curiosity?"

"This is *dangerous*," Rose insisted, her eyes hardening. "At *least* tell your father, James."

James shook his head. "Dad's completely swamped," he replied. "Ever since Petra's arrest, he's been buried in some major secret plan. Titus Hardcastle came over for it, and even Viktor Krum and the Harriers. Dad doesn't trust the locals much, and they don't trust him, so he thought it'd be best to bring his own blokes along for this last raid, whatever it is. There's no way I'm going to throw this on him as well."

"Is it the W.U.L.F.?" Rose asked, interested in spite of herself. "Has Uncle Harry found them? And that missing Muggle politician?"

James shook his head and shrugged. "All I know for sure is that it's all going to go down in the next few days. Dad can't even come to my Clutchcudgel tournament. He and Titus Hardcastle are going to be in New Amsterdam, 'doing some last minute reconnaissance' is what he told me. There's going to be a big Muggle parade that night—it's some American holiday or other."

"Memorial Day," Zane piped up, nodding.

"Yeah, that," James agreed. "Dad says it'll be the perfect time to make last-minute arrangements since everybody will be distracted with the parade and all the festivities. Last time he tried to raid them, the bad guys caught wind of it somehow, and got away only hours before. Dad doesn't want that to happen this time."

Rose sighed. "Well," she admitted, "I do feel a bit better knowing that this could all be over soon. You'll be coming home after this is all said and done? Assuming Uncle Harry's raid goes well?"

"Oh, it'll be a smash," Zane nodded confidently. "I mean, he's Harry Potter, right? The Boy Who Lived! And he's got his A-team with him! Hardcastle, Krum, everybody! Those W.U.L.F. loons and their crazy new lady leader will be breaking rocks in Fort Bedlam by this time next week. You wait and see."

Rose accepted this stolidly. "Well, then. Sorry your dad won't be there to see you play in your tournament, James," she said a little stiffly. "And I do wish you well, no matter what."

James shrugged, as if he didn't really mind that his dad wouldn't be there, which he did. "It's all right," he said. "Mum says that Viktor Krum might come along with her since Dad doesn't really need him for his little lookie-loo around New Amsterdam that day. Besides, Lily will be there too along with Izzy, Uncle Percy and everybody else. That'll be pretty cool. I mean, how many players get to have a former professional Quidditch player and Triwizard Tournament contestant supporting them from the stands?"

"Not many, I'd guess," Rose admitted. "Strange that your dad doesn't want Viktor to come along for his reconnaissance mission since he came all that way to help out. But anyway, no matter how it all turns out, *promise* me, all three of you, that you'll be careful."

"We'll be careful," Zane said soothingly. "We'll watch out for each other, Rosy. I won't let anything happen to your cousin."

Rose sighed harshly and shook her head. "I'm less worried about the three of *you*," she said grimly, "than I am the universe in general."



When the day of the Clutchcudgel tournament match finally came around, the school was universally abuzz with excitement and anticipation. The irony of the decade's worst team facing off against the long-time champions was not in the least lost on the student body at large. Banners had appeared on the balconies of several of the mansions and rowhouses, proclaiming support for Team Bigfoot in the face of their daunting adversary. "STOMP THE WOLVES!" the poster on Hermes Mansion declared in bright green letters, accompanied by a messily painted (and animated) drawing of a gigantic foot mashing a werewolf's whimpering head. All over the campus, the members of Team Bigfoot were greeted with encouraging cheers and backslaps, reducing the players to sheepish, happy grins.

James made his way through the day's last exam—Clockwork Mechanics, with Professor Cloverhoof—in a state of nervous euphoria. On one hand, he harbored a secret confidence that Team Bigfoot might actually succeed in winning the tournament, with the help of the other four houses, whose grudges against Team Werewolf had made them exceedingly eager to assist in whatever way they could. On the other hand, James was painfully aware that if they lost, there was much more at stake than mere house pride and a place on Victory Hill.

"Good luck tonight, Mr. Potter," Professor Cloverhoof commented as he examined James' Clockwork test assignment, a magic-powered owl feeder. "Thoroughly prepared, are you?"

James nodded. "As prepared as we'll ever be, I think."

"I am given to understand that my own students have taught your team a few of our better tactics," Cloverhoof said, tipping a handful of birdseed into the tiny clockwork hopper. The machine's brass gears began to turn and click industriously. "I trust that you will keep such things to yourselves, hmm?"

James nodded again, more quickly. "Absolutely, sir!"

"Excellent," the professor grinned. "But for tonight, young man..." here, Cloverhoof leaned over the desk slightly, his grin turning predatory, "use them well, and send those wolves to the doghouse. With our blessing."

"Will do, sir!" James agreed, taking a step back from the professor's mirthless grin. Tiny chugs and ratchettings sounded from the Clockwork owl feeder. After a moment, it deposited a small supply of seed into a copper dish and let out a happy little *ding*.

"Excellent work, Mr. Potter," Cloverhoof said breezily, leaning back at his desk. "On *all* counts."

As James made his way out into the heat of the campus, heading for a late lunch at Apollo Mansion, he thought on what Cloverhoof had said. The truth of it was that he was just a bit nervous about some of what the other houses had offered by way of assistance. Much of it, like the Zombies' Clutch spells, struck James as rather experimental and risky—the sort of things that the teams might have considered throughout the season, but never quite had the guts (or the audacity) to try themselves. The Igors, for instance, had installed tiny clockwork gizmos on the backs of some of Team Bigfoot's skrims. James knew what they did—they had even partly been his idea, although he hadn't been entirely serious about it—and yet he was worried that they weren't technically legal. Perhaps even worse, Team Vampire had offered the Foots the use of some rather dastardly curses and airborne potions.

"Entirely sporting," the Vampire magic coach, a boy named Ellis Alekzander had insisted seriously. His narrowed eyes and tight smile had seemed to say just the opposite, however. "I've packaged them in convenient little pouches. Your team can wear one each around their neck. When the right time comes, simply pull the ripcord attached to the top here. The wind will do the rest."

Norrick had been especially pleased by the Vampires' 'game cursology' tactics.

"Lesson twelve in the Werewolves' own handbook," he declared, holding up the tiny pouch. "All's fair in love and war'. Right back at'cha, fellas!"

Still, despite James' worries about the dubious nature of some of the other teams' suggested tactics, his overall plan seemed to have worked even better than he could have hoped. The members of Team Bigfoot, from Jazmine Jade to Mukthatch, seemed thoroughly convinced that they could win the tournament and unseat the reigning Werewolf champions. They'd even begun talking about what life would be like on Victory Hill.

"I hear that Apollo Mansion hasn't been on the Hill for over a hundred years!" a senior Bigfoot boy named Troy Covington said when James met the team in the kitchen for lunch. "Yeats told me. He was here back then, making grilled cheese sandwiches with pickles, just like today."

"We'll have to move all the game room stuff ourselves, after the mansions swap places," Wentworth commented through a mouthful of sandwich. "The cellars don't move, of course, and we sure don't want to let those Werewolf goons have our ping pong table."

"Or the disarma...dillo," Jazmine added. "OR, Heckle and Jeckle."

"Wraagh Arbphle!" Mukthatch concurred, nodding.

Norrick frowned. "That's right. That fridge is dead heavy. We'll have to levitate it."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," James interrupted, raising his hands. "Let's just concentrate on winning tonight, eh? The rest will take care of itself."

As James finished his lunch and prepared to head off to his last class, he met Professor Wood in the hallway.

"James," Wood said, and James could tell by his tone of voice that the professor had been looking for him. "Come with me down to my office for a moment, would you? I want to talk to you about something."

James gulped. "Er, sure, Professor," he replied, and followed Wood toward the stairs.

Wood didn't speak until he was seated at his desk in the corner of the mid-day-empty game-room. James settled into one of the old reclining easy chairs across from the professor's crooked desk. He sank deep into its sprung seat, but didn't lean back. Heckle and Jeckle hung on either side of the nearby refrigerator, apparently asleep. The disarmedillo had managed to climb onto the corner of Wood's desk, where it lay curled in a sort of armored ball, its narrow nose on its forepaws. James waited for Wood to begin. After a thoughtful pause, the professor drew a breath and peered up at the low ceiling.

"The Bigfoot Clutchcudgel team has done remarkably well this season, hasn't it?" he asked with forced casualness.

James nodded. "Yes sir."

"*Unusually* well, many would say," Wood went on, still looking up at the ceiling, his hands folded on his chest. He shook his head slowly, musingly, and then lowered his gaze to the boy across from him. With a small smile, he said, "You know, James, I've been President of Apollo Mansion for several years. I took it over from the previous Bigfoot President, Maxwell Greenfield, when I became a full professor and he decided to retire. I remember it like it was yesterday. Chancellor Franklyn called me to his office, and Greenfield was there when I arrived. Together, they told me about the history of Bigfoot House, about how, despite what many believed, it was the real backbone of the entire school. Bigfoot House, they said, is Alma Aleron's true melting pot. Back then, you see, Apollo Mansion was home to two Arctic Sasquatches, a she-werewolf, a half-goblin, two American Indian shamans from Shackamaxon, and an Atlantean merman who had to sleep in a giant tub and wear a water helmet to classes. As you now know, Bigfoot House enjoys the same diversity today as it did then, not as a slogan or a gimmick, but as a basic fact of life. Just as Franklyn told me on that day, years ago, we, the Bigfoots, represent the true American ideal."

James nodded again, not quite sure what any of this had to do with the Bigfoot Clutch team. "Sure, Professor. I mean, we've got Jazmine, who's part-Veela, although she hardly ever acts like it. And Mukthatch, and Went, whose a... er..."

"It's all right," Wood said, smiling a bit more easily. "I know about Mr. Paddington. Wentworth's parents made arrangements with the school administration to keep his, er, *heritage* a secret. They themselves are part of the Crimson Teetotalers League. That means they've trained themselves not to require blood at all. Extremely dedicated to their new lives they are, which is why they felt it was important for Wentworth to receive a normal magical education. One would think that he would have ended up in Vampire House, of course, but as you might imagine, Apollo Mansion is a much better fit for him."

James nodded meaningfully. "Yeah, we spent some time in Vampire House. They think *real* vampires have to be like the ones in Remora's stupid books—all unbelievably good-looking and tragically romantic and rubbish like that."

"In all fairness," Wood said, as if he felt it was his duty. "Some vampires *are* like that." Here, he paused and bobbed his head thoughtfully. "Although not very many, admittedly. You understand

then, why so many *real* vampires, werewolves, and even the occasional pixie, actually come to live with the Foots. Don't you?"

"Because here, they can be *who* they are, and not just *what* they are." James stopped and frowned. "Er, right?"

Wood nodded heartily. "Well said, James. That's exactly it. But there is one more thing that the former Bigfoot President and Chancellor Franklyn impressed upon me when I took this post." He leaned forward and crossed his arms on his desk, cupping his elbows. He studied James seriously. "They told me that Bigfoot House really is the moral core of all the campus societies. And as such, it is held to a rather higher standard of conduct. Fairness, honesty, respect, courage, these are the things that are exemplified by the Bigfoot banner, and these must be applied to *all* areas of life. Most specifically, at least as far as you and I are concerned, these qualities are meant to be demonstrated on the sporting field. Chancellor Franklyn was very clear about this when he asked me to take the post of House President. He knew I had played professional Quidditch, you see, and worried that I might allow my love of victory to cloud my judgment in this regard. Winning, he told me, must always be secondary to self respect and the courage of one's convictions. I vowed to them that I completely concurred with that philosophy. In the years since, I have tried very hard, James, to maintain that record—not a record of wins and losses, you see, but a record of honorable matches, well-played and strenuous, with an eye, ultimately, to fairness and respect."

Wood stopped, and James realized that the professor's eyes had grown rather unfocused. He wasn't quite looking at James, but rather into the darkness of the game room. James waited, fearing the worst—that Wood was going to forbid Team Bigfoot from using their recently acquired game magic in the night's tournament match.

"We've lost every year," Wood finally said, blinking and returning his gaze to James. "Not just the tournament, but nearly every single match. We've always had a good team, a solid team, but we've never won. We were building character, though. At least, that's what I told myself. And building character is important, no question."

Wood paused again, as if struggling with himself.

"Character is important," James began, but Wood waved him into silence.

"I've allowed you to teach Team Bigfoot game magic, James," he said seriously. "It was against my better judgment, but I allowed it. Because I saw that while you were teaching the team to play in a way that was decidedly unlike previous Bigfoot teams, going back over a century, you were still managing to play each match with respect, honor, and fairness. Er, *Mostly*. And then, you introduced the concepts of the magical martial arts—*Artis Decerto*. You built that clockwork contraption in the back garden, with the help of Professor Cloverhoof and some of the Zombie House students. This, again, was contrary to my better judgment. And yet I allowed it. Perhaps it was a mistake. And yet, I saw that there *might* be some good in it. *Artis Decerto* is a respected discipline, after all, if used wisely and with self-control."

Wood was nodding slightly, thoughtfully. James was afraid to speak now, afraid of the boom he felt certain was about to fall. He held his breath. Wood met his gaze once more, gravely this time.

"I received a visit from the Chancellor this morning, James," he said carefully. "He is... *concerned*. He has been watching the progress of Team Bigfoot very closely, and while he is not claiming that we have done anything *wrong*, precisely, he *did* acknowledge some growing trepidation about our very non-traditional methods. It has reached his attention that you have been making the rounds to the other houses—all but Werewolf House, of course—seeking assistance in defeating Team Werewolf in tonight's match. James, is this correct?"

James felt pinned to the chair. He pressed his lips together so tightly that they became a thin white line on his face. He nodded, once.

Wood sighed and leaned back in his chair again. "Chancellor Franklyn made his wishes quite clear, James. He is no longer only worried about the integrity of Bigfoot House, but of the entire school in general. He feels that you have broken the unspoken code of Apollo Mansion, and reversed the moral standard that we are meant to uphold for the sake of the rest of the campus."

"But—!" James began, only to be waved into silence again by Professor Wood.

"He did not tell me what to do, James," the professor went on. "He left the decision to me, and I've been thinking about it all day."

Wood stopped once more. He seemed to be studying James, his face very stern and solemn. Nearly thirty seconds went by. The *disarmadillo* snorted, stirred and got up. It waddled over to Wood, who petted it on its plated head, not taking his eyes from James.

"I've made my decision," the professor finally said quietly, emphatically. "You see, I am aware of the things people say about me around the campus. I am aware that they believe I don't have the heart to win anymore; that I left my passion for victory on the Quidditch pitch back in England. Maybe they are even partly right. After the Battle, it was hard to think about using magic that way again, even in a sporting match. And yet, I *believe* in the deeper mission of Bigfoot House. I am committed to it, no matter what. And thus, James, after my conversation with Chancellor Franklyn this morning, I have made my decision. I have decided to do... nothing."

James blinked. He shook his head slightly, as if to clear it, and then craned his head toward the man behind the big crooked desk. "Excuse me, sir?"

"I'm not going to do anything," Wood said simply, raising his eyebrows and turning his hands palm up over the desk. "I've been watching you lot myself, James. I've seen the exact same things that the Chancellor has, and yet I have interpreted them entirely differently. You have learned to play the game very well, all of you, and to strive for excellence, all *without* sacrificing your integrity or the dignity of your opponents. You have trained yourselves to become superior based solely on your skills and discipline. You have sought to be creative and intelligent on the Clutch course while still playing with honor. Now, you have succeeded in rallying nearly the whole school to your side—going so far even as to earn their entirely fair and legal assistance. Where Chancellor Franklyn sees potential debauchery, *I* happen to see a team that has played so well, and yet so fairly,

that even those whom they have defeated wish to assist them on to further victory. If this in itself does not perfectly exemplify the sort of moral standard that Bigfoot House has always strove to maintain, then I daresay nothing does."

As Wood spoke, a grin of dawning realization grew onto James' face. Wood wasn't going to forbid them from using the new game magic. Wood almost seemed, in fact, to be encouraging them to go on exactly as planned.

"Really, Professor?" James asked, barely able to contain himself. He gripped the fat arms of his reclining chair, pulling himself upright.

"Really, James," Wood agreed, meeting James' smile. "Under one condition."

"What's that, sir?" James asked, somewhat warily.

"Chancellor Franklyn did not tell me what to do," Wood said seriously. "He merely shared his concerns, assuming I would comply. I am not. However, I *am* sharing those same concerns with you, and granting you the same responsibility. Whatever the other houses have offered Team Bigfoot by way of help, James, use it well. Use it with honor and integrity or do not use it at all. I could enforce this rule myself, as you know, but if I have learned anything myself over the course of this year, it is that a lesson learned on one's own is far more deeply rooted than a lesson forced by rules. Will you be wise with what you know? You and the team in general?"

James nodded. "I will, Professor," he said. "But Jazmine's the team captain. Shouldn't you be having this conversation with her as well?"

Wood smiled crookedly. "I already have," he agreed. "And she said the same thing that you did. I am content. Thank you, James. I'm sure you have preparations to make for tonight's big event. You are dismissed."

James grinned and nodded. Jumping up, he ran back toward the stairs, threading his way through the assembled couches, tables and mismatched floor lamps. Just as he began to tromp up the stairs, Wood called his name one more time.

"Yes sir?" James replied, stopping and peering back across the game room.

Wood was still smiling, but it was unlike any other smile James had ever seen on the man's face. It was wide, tight, and very slightly frightening.

"I *haven't* forgotten what it means to win, James," he said, his voice calm but emphatic in the empty room. "But I *had* forgotten how *really excellent* it feels. If Team Bigfoot is going to win the tournament tonight, then we have to give it absolutely everything we've got, and do it with as much heart, guts and pride as we can."

"Yes sir," James agreed, grinning eagerly. For the first time, he thought he was seeing Oliver Wood the way his father had seen him, back when he'd been the student captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, driven to excellence and hungry for victory.

Wood nodded and narrowed his eyes. "Go on, then," he said with restrained fervor. "And let's put those wolves in their place."

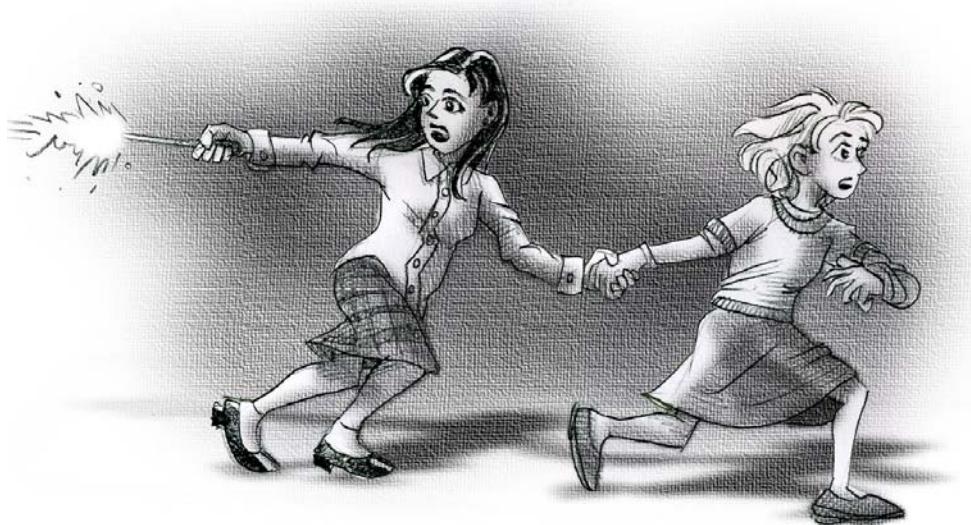
James ran the rest of the way up the stairs, his heart nearly bursting with excitement and delight.

It wasn't until later that afternoon, as he was gathering his Clutch gear from under the bed in his dormitory room, that it occurred to him that Chancellor Franklyn might have had ulterior reasons for talking to Wood about Team Bigfoot's playing style. Perhaps—just perhaps—Franklyn *had* learned the secret of Magnussen's riddle about the eyes of Roberts. Franklyn was, after all, incredibly smart. Perhaps he knew that if Apollo Mansion ever again sat upon Victory Hill, it would complete the cornerstone, potentially activating the Nexus Curtain. If so, he had probably done everything he could to assure that that would never happen, even going so far as to invent a ruse that would discourage any Bigfoot House President from leading his Clutch team to victory.

If that had been Franklyn's goal, then James had to give the man credit: it had very nearly worked.

If the President of Bigfoot House had been anyone other than Oliver Wood, it still might have.

Thinking this, James grabbed his wrist gauntlets, jersey and shoulder pads. A minute later, he met the rest of Team Bigfoot along with Ralph and Zane on the steps outside Apollo Mansion. Noisily, excitedly, accompanied by encouraging cheers from many along the way, the troop began to make their way across the campus, heading toward Pepperpock Down, and into Clutchcudgel history.



22. WOVEN DESTINIES

As the gathering neared Pepperpock Down, it accumulated a following of students from other houses, forming something like an escort. By the time they passed by Administration Hall, there were over a hundred people walking along with the Bigfoot Clutch team, shouting happily, cheering, waving banners, and tossing old Clutches overhead. James was nearly bursting with mingled excitement and apprehension. The encouragement of the other houses (all but Werewolf House, of course) was both exhilarating and a bit frightening since James knew that it would probably taper off quickly if Team Bigfoot did not immediately hold their own against the Werewolf juggernaut.

As they passed by the Medical College, James was surprised to see Uncle Percy standing near the doors, his face tense and distracted. Lucy stood by his side as well as a small knot of nurses, doctors, and (James noticed with some dismay) Wizarding Court officials. He recognized the latter by their slate grey tunics and severe expressions.

"What's going on over there?" he asked, nudging Ralph and pointing.

Ralph looked and shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe they're here for the match?"

"Uncle Percy, perhaps," James said doubtfully, raising his voice over the accompanying crowd, "but not those blokes from the American Wizarding Court."

Zane peered over the crowd toward the doors of the Medical College. "I don't see Keynes, at least."

James nodded, frowning. "No. But still..." He paused, craning to look as the crowd pushed him onward, past the medical complex. A blonde-haired girl moved next to Lucy in the center of the gaggle of court agents. It was Izzy, her face pale and worried, looking up at the severe expressions of those all around her. James felt a sudden sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Izzy's with them," Ralph said, noticing the same thing. "You don't think..."

"They wouldn't," Zane said, not very convincingly. "Not while the match is going on. Keynes and his goons may have plans to Obliviate Iz and send her off to be adopted into the Muggle world, but they wouldn't do it already. Er... I think."

James wasn't so sure. As the crowd forced the team onward toward Pepperpock Down, he lost sight of the gathering on the Medical College steps. Just because Keynes wasn't visible, that didn't mean he wasn't there. He could very well be inside, making arrangements. The arbiter didn't strike James as the sort of man who would allow a sporting event to interrupt his plans. Still, there was nothing James could do about it at the moment. He felt a deep sense of misgiving, nonetheless. At least Uncle Percy was there, and Lucy. They wouldn't let anything bad happen to Izzy.

If they could help it, at least.

James shook his head, clearing his thoughts. He had other difficulties at the moment.

Pepperpock Down hove into view as the team angled around Administration Hall. It was already nearly full, thrumming with the roar of the crowd, alive with waving flags and popping bursts of Firework Spells. James' heart skipped a beat and then galloped to catch up. He grinned as the crowd escorted the team into the shadow of the rampart grandstands. A cheer went up in support of the approaching Bigfoots. It throbbed in the air, blotting out every other noise, and James couldn't help turning to look back at his fellow players, exultant with nervous excitement.

"Go Foots!" Jazmine Jade suddenly cried, raising her voice, barely, over the roar of the cheers.

"*Go Foots!*" the rest of the team echoed back, pumping their fists in the air. Mukthatch let out a surprisingly loud roar, and then grinned a little sheepishly as everyone boggled at him.

A moment later, the team crossed the field and disappeared into the cellar locker room, where their skrimms and Professor Wood awaited them.

"This is it, team!" he called out, clapping his hands together eagerly. "Get geared up and let's meet on the platform for practice laps in ten minutes!"

Wood met James' eye as he turned to climb the steps. He winked and smiled crookedly, almost mischievously. James grinned at the professor and then began to strap on his new wrist gauntlets.

By the time the last of the team clumped up onto the platform, the sun had lowered to a huge bronze ball on the horizon, casting its last beams onto the waving flags and banners of the grandstands. The crowd was in extremely high spirits, producing a nearly constant roar of happy exhilaration. James blinked in the late afternoon glare and fingered his skrim.

Only minutes earlier, while the team had still been congregated in the locker cellar, James had called them together in a quick huddle. There, he had announced one change to the evening's Clutch magic game.

"No curses," he'd said firmly, producing a chorus of objections from the gathered team members.

"Why not?" Norrick had asked stridently. "We'll need to use everything we've got against those Wolves!"

"Not curses," James had repeated. "Leave the potion pouches down here in your lockers. They may be legal and they may not be, but that's not really the point, is it? The Foots play a clean game. Nothing dirty, right? We'll win this match, but we'll do it with our heads held high just like always! Understood?"

"James is right," Jazmine had added resolutely, removing the potion pouch from around her neck. "We'll win this match straight up! We don't need to resort to Vampire curses. That sort of thing is for teams that don't play as well as the Bigfoots! Am I right?"

To James' surprise and delight, the team had responded with a hearty cheer. All around, the Bigfoots players had removed the potion pouches from around their necks and piled them on the shelf next to their skirms.

Now, standing in the sunset light and looking across the rings toward the Werewolves' platform, James felt a pang of doubt. The powdered curses might have been sneaky and a bit devilish, but all of a sudden James agreed with Norrick: they were going to need everything in their arsenal to beat the Wolves.

With their backs to the sunset, Team Werewolf appeared to be fringed with molten gold. Clayton Altaire stood in the front, grinning malevolently, his skrim standing next to him, decorated with a snarling wolf's visage. Flanking him were Olivia Jones and Jeremiah Dunckel. All of them stared across the lofty open space of the field, smirking with seamless confidence.

"Don't let them spook you," Wood called, summoning the team into a huddle. "Team Werewolf is a good team, an excellent team, but you lot are every bit as skilled as they are and then some. Their overconfidence will be their downfall! They expect to win this match easily with hardly any effort. They think that Victory Hill is their birthright. Are they right?"

"No!" Team Bigfoot cried out in rowdy unison.

"Will you lie down and let them win just because they're the Werewolves?"

"No!" the team barked again, louder.

Wood shouted over the crowd, "*Will* you take the match to them and show them that their arrogance is their greatest weakness!?"

This time, the team exploded in a shout so loud that the crowd all around could hear them. "YES!"

"Who are we?" Wood demanded.

“The Bigfoots!”

Wood asked again, “WHO are we?”

“THE BIGFOOTS!” This time, the shout dissolved into a deafening cheer as the gathered crowd took up the cry, turning it into a chant: “*BIG-FOOTS! BIG-FOOTS! BIG-FOOTS!*” Fireworks popped from the grandstands all around and banners waved frantically against the purple sky.

“Line up!” Wood shouted, smiling grimly. “Practice laps! Team captain?”

“Viper formation,” Jazmine barked, dropping her skrim and jumping onto it. “*Go Foots!*”

The rest of the team returned the cry and followed Jazmine out into the rings, slipping easily into formation. James was among the last to take off. For one instant, he felt a pang of mortal worry. *This isn't going to work*, he thought, panic washing over him like a tidal wave. *We can't do this! They'll slaughter us!* For a split second, he was convinced that he had forgotten everything—all the game magic they had practiced, all the formations and maneuvers, everything the other House teams had taught them, even how to fly a skrim. He stared down at the odd broom as it floated next to him, one of his feet planted on its middle, holding it steady. He felt frozen in place.

A hand clapped him gently on the shoulder. When James looked up, it was Professor Wood.

“Don't worry about it, James,” Wood suggested, nodding encouragingly. “Just have fun, eh? This is what you were made for.”

James looked at the professor, hoping he was right. He nodded, gulped, and then swung his other foot onto the beam of his skrim. A moment later, the platform was gone, replaced by open space.

James remembered everything.

Less than a minute later, Professor Sanuye blew his official's whistle. From that point on, there was no looking back.

The match was a blur of wild motion, punctuated only by the whoosh of the rings, the buffet of passing players, and the occasional thump and cry as Bullies collided with Clippers. Spells sizzled through the air all around and James thought he had never experienced such intense, instantaneous ferocity. It was as if the Wolves were pulling out all the stops from the very moment the whistle blew, meaning to crush Team Bigfoot's spirit even before it had a chance to take root. As James passed through the center ring in pursuit of a Werewolf Clipper, he was walloped from overhead by what felt like a passing freight train. He spun off his skrim, grabbed onto it as he fell away, and then swung back up on the other side—a maneuver he had practiced so many times in the Gauntlet that it was nearly second nature. As he re-oriented himself, he glanced aside. Pentz, the boy who had tried to knock him off his skrim the very first time he, James, had attempted to fly one, was rocketing away, grinning back over his shoulder.

James shook his head, fuming, and darted back into the rings, rejoining the flow of the match.

It was difficult to keep track of the match as it was underway. James tried to be aware of what the rest of his team was doing, but the viciousness and speed of the Werewolves' tactics made it a challenge simply to stay on his skrim. James was sure that he had never flown so fast for so long, and yet he was barely keeping up. At one point during the first quarter, he saw Jazmine and Gobbins performing one of the two-man offensive spells that the Pixies had taught them with some apparent success. Later, he followed Wentworth in Clipper formation and saw the smaller boy activate one of the Igors' ingenious gizmos from the rear of his skrim. A small box popped open and a Boggart deployed from it, immediately taking the shape of a ghastly flying clown. Clayton Altaire, who had been gaining on Wentworth in Bully position, nearly fell off his skrim as the clown loomed over him. James flashed past and used the *Riddikulus* spell his father had taught him to turn the clown into a cloud of ping pong balls, which fell away into the darkness below.

In general, the team seemed to be putting everything they knew to good use, and yet as the match neared halftime, James noticed with dismay that Team Werewolf was leading by a score of fifty-two to forty-four.

And then, fifteen seconds before the end of the second quarter, James heard a sickening thud and a shout of pain. The crowd roared deafeningly, either in anger or encouragement, and James glanced around, seeking the source of the cry. His heart rammed up into his throat as he saw Norrick falling into the darkness of the field, his arms and legs thrashing at the empty air. Far over him, his skrim spun lazily, weaving a looping trail out over one of the grandstands. Professor Sanuye's wand was out in a flash.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" he shouted, his voice thin with distance.

Norrick bobbed upwards, missing the grassy field below by less than ten feet. He hovered over his shadow, his right arm dangling limply.

The crowd, which had fallen silent for a few seconds, erupted with mingled cheers and jeers. From the announcer's booth, Cheshire Chatterly's voice rang out.

"Bigfoot number six, Willem Norrick, appears to be injured after a *devastating* sideswipe by Werewolf number nine, Parker Pentz," she cried, obviously angry. "Match Official Sanuye is escorting Norrick to the Bigfoot platform. Unless we hear otherwise, it would appear that Mr. Norrick will be out for the rest of this match, leaving Team Bigfoot one player short!"

James shouted to Norrick as Sanuye levitated him to the platform, "Norrick! How bad is it?"

"Bad enough!" Norrick called back through gritted teeth. "But I'll keep playing! That punk can't get rid of me that easily!"

James glanced back at the 'punk' in question. Pentz flew in a lazy arc around the Werewolf platform, grinning crookedly.

"Do we have any reserve players?" Gobbins asked, floating up to join James near the center ring.

"Rrrarpgh!" Mukthatch answered dolefully from his place by the goal ring.

"We only had Kleinschmidt," James said. "And he came down with the yipsplits from eating too many of Yeats' dragon fingers."

"He'd have been no help anyway," Gobbins observed mournfully. "Kid flies a skrim like a fish flies a kite."

"So what'll we do?" James asked.

Gobbins shrugged. "We play one man short unless we can find a replacement. Can you think of anyone else who can suit up in Norrick's place?"

James shook his head dourly.

From the Bigfoot platform, Professor Sanuye turned away from Norrick and blew his whistle.

"Penalty, Team Werewolf," he called out, using his wand to amplify his voice. "Malicious sideswiping. Three minutes in the dock."

James glanced back to the Werewolf platform in time to see Pentz dropping easily onto it. The Werewolf coach, a college-level student with a blocky head and a crew cut, collected Pentz's skrim and grinned tightly.

"They planned it," Gobbins commented wonderingly. "Pentz did it on purpose! See how easy they're taking the penalty?"

James sighed angrily. "Well, at least our numbers will be even for the next three minutes."

"Three minutes nothing!" Gobbins said, glancing back at him. "It's only thirteen seconds 'til halftime! All penalties are canceled at that point! Why do you think they waited to do this now? Come next half, they'll have a full crew and we'll be down by one! Unless Norrick can keep playing."

As if on cue, Cheshire Chatterly spoke again, her voice echoing from the announcer's box.

"*And Willem Norrick is escorted down to the field by the medical crew, apparently suffering a dislocated shoulder at the hands of Team Werewolf.* Thus, with no reserves, Team Bigfoot finds themselves one player short of a full squad. Daunting odds indeed for the perennial underdogs."

James' face was hot with anger and frustration. When Sanuye blew his whistle again, announcing the resumption of play, he felt clumsy on his skrim. Werewolf players thundered past, quickly collecting all three Clutches. By the time the halftime horn sounded, two of those Clutches had been turned into scores. Team Werewolf circled like wasps, barking gleefully and collapsing onto their platform in triumph.

"How's Norrick?" Jazmine asked dispiritedly as she landed on the Bigfoot platform.

"He'll be all right," Wood replied, sighing, "by tomorrow afternoon. For now, I'm afraid he's out of the match."

"Do we have to forfeit?" Wentworth asked, his eyes huge and angry behind his glasses.

"Not legally, no," Wood answered immediately. "But we are at a distinct disadvantage. Let's give it a vote. Do you lot want to go on with the match? Or shall we pack it in and head down to the Kite and Key to celebrate a season well spent?"

"No way," Gobbins announced loudly. "I'll take them all on myself even if the rest of you go home. Lousy cheats! I'll teach them to play dirty like that!"

"I'm in too," Jazmine said, firming her jaw.

"Wraak Rubffthuth!" Mukthatch agreed, nodding vigorously.

"We can still take them," James added, sounding much more confident than he felt. "This is our match to win!"

"Hear hear," Wood concurred as the rest of the team cheered in agreement. "Then we stay and play on. You're doing incredibly well, all of you. I have nothing else to tell you than just to keep it up. Now that we're down one player, though, we'll all have to be even more alert. Concentrate on offense, sink as many scores as you can. You'll have to get used to playing Clipper and Bully at the same time whenever necessary. We can do that because you all know all the parts, right?"

"Right!" Team Bigfoot responded with slightly less than their original fervor.

"Right," Wood agreed. "Now get something to drink and limber up. We're back in the air in three minutes."

It was nearly full dark by now with only a pink rim spreading along the western horizon. James took a moment to look around the grandstands, hoping to see some sign of his family. Sure enough, he spotted his mum in the grandstand directly behind the Bigfoot platform. She saw him looking and waved at him, her face pale and strained, as if she were desperately wishing the match were over rather than merely at halftime. Next to her was Lily, Aunt Audrey, Cousin Molly, and Viktor Krum, who sat ramrod straight, his face etched with restrained anger.

Join the club, James thought sourly. And then: *where's everyone else?*

He scanned the seats all around his mum. There was no sign of Albus. Neither in sight were Uncle Percy, Lucy, or Izzy. James was again visited by that sense of sinking dread. *I can't think about that now*, he reminded himself. *Win the Clutch match first. Then deal with everything else.*

Wood called the team over to the edge of the platform. Halftime was nearly over. James turned away from his family and Viktor Krum, returning to the matter at hand.

But where are they, he thought naggingly, worriedly. *What in the world could be so important that Lucy, Izzy, and Albus wouldn't be here to watch the match?*

Shortly enough, though, the teams launched from their platforms and merged into the figure eight course. Professor Sanuye blew his whistle once more and the match launched again into motion, wild and ferocious.

In the midst of it, James forgot about his brother, friend, and cousin completely.



Lucy *was* watching the match, in fact, in a manner of speaking.

"What's the score?" Izzy asked, her voice small.

"I don't know," Lucy replied quietly. "The scoreboard's too little to make out from here."

The two girls sat in a small waiting area on the fourth floor of the Medical College. Nearby, a round desk was dominated by a ghostly miniature representation of the ongoing Clutchcudgel tournament match. The tiny spectral players swooped and zoomed silently through rings no larger than dinner plates. The witch working the desk was plump and pale, her red hair cut so short and curly that it looked like a helmet. She was watching the match whenever she wasn't glancing furtively at the Wizarding Court officials gathered near the hall.

"Which one is James?" Izzy asked for the third time. She leaned her head against Lucy's shoulder.

"One of the ones wearing blue and orange," Lucy answered patiently. "With dark hair. It's hard to keep track of him with things moving so fast."

Izzy nodded against Lucy's shoulder.

From the hallway nearby, voices approached. Lucy looked up, feeling a gulf of nervousness in her stomach. She'd volunteered at the Medical College for the past two months, mostly for extra credit, but also because she liked being around the recuperating patients, liked helping people who were so grateful for even the slightest thing. Tonight, however, she wasn't working. She wouldn't have been allowed to be here at all if her father hadn't been who he was. As a senior vice director in the Ministry of Magic, he was the closest thing to an official representative of Izzy's home government as was likely to be found. There wasn't much he could do other than observe, but he was committed to doing that, if nothing else, and Lucy loved him for it. She herself was only there to keep Izzy company until the moment came when the men would call the blonde girl back into the room beyond the hall's double doors. When Izzy came out of those doors again, she wouldn't know who Lucy was, or anyone else for that matter. At that point, Izzy would be as alone as anyone on earth could be. Until that happened, Lucy meant to stay by her side.

"What are they going to do to me?" Izzy asked without raising her head.

Lucy pressed her lips together tightly and then said, "They're going to make you forget."

Izzy nodded again. "There are some things it'll be nice to forget."

Lucy considered this as she stared at the large round desk and the tiny ghostly Clutch players that swirled over it.

"Will I forget my mother?" Izzy asked.

Lucy began to answer and then paused. "Actually," she answered quietly, "you may not. She wasn't a witch."

There was another pause. The voices in the hallway were still talking, quietly and intensely. Lucy heard her father among them. She couldn't tell what they were saying, but she could see their shadows on the hallway wall, gesturing animatedly.

"Will I forget the lake?" Izzy asked softly. She lifted her head and looked directly at Lucy, her eyes intent. "Will I forget the gazebo and the Wishing Tree?"

Lucy didn't know what that meant. "Probably," she ventured. "I expect so."

Izzy nodded. "Good. That's good. I don't want to remember that."

Lucy sighed deeply. The men in the hall had stopped walking as they talked, but now they approached again. Lucy sensed that they were finally coming for Izzy. For her own part, Izzy wasn't paying them any attention.

"When it's all over," she asked, leaning her head on Lucy's shoulder again, "will Petra and I be able to go home again? Back to our little rowhouse here at the school?"

Lucy held her breath, her eyes widening slowly. She supposed she could lie to Izzy. After all, in a few minutes, none of it would matter. Izzy wouldn't remember that she ever had a big stepsister, much less the details of this conversation. And yet, Lucy couldn't bring herself to tell Izzy anything other than the truth.

"No, Iz," she said very softly. "I'm sorry. No."

"Where will we go then?" Izzy asked, and as she raised her head once more, Lucy saw the first cloud of doubt pass over the girl's face.

"You'll go... somewhere else," Lucy answered, not taking her gaze from Izzy's eyes.

Izzy whispered, "But what about Petra?"

Lucy shook her head and tried to smile encouragingly. It was very difficult. "It'll be all right, Iz," she said. "You won't remember her."

Izzy's face began to darken. Her lips pulled down in a slow frown and her brow clouded. Her eyes thickened with sudden tears. "I'll remember Petra," she said, certainty and doubt mingling in her words. "I could *never* forget Petra."

"I'm sorry, Iz," Lucy said, cursing herself for ruining the poor girl's last moments of awareness.

"I won't forget Petra," Izzy said again stubbornly. A tear spilled over onto her right cheek and she glanced toward the door. The men came into sight even as she looked. The one in the lead was the arbiter, Albert Keynes. Behind him, looking perfectly miserable, his face pinched into a helpless frown, was Lucy's father.

"Izabella," Keynes said, cocking his head slightly and smiling, "come on over here now, darling. We're all ready for you."

"No," Izzy replied immediately, pressing back into her chair. Her lower lip stuck out in defiance.

Keynes stopped in front of Izzy. Still smiling, he hunkered down on one knee before her.

"I'm afraid I can't take no for an answer, darling," the man said, tilting his head toward her, as if he meant to play. "Come along with me, and when it's all over, I'll give you a lollipop."

"I won't remember lollipops when it's all over," Izzy replied immediately. "And I won't remember you. Or Lucy. Or any of the rest of you. And I won't... remember... *Petra*."

Lucy realized that Izzy was crying. Tears ran down her pink cheeks in shining rivulets. They weren't tears of sadness, however, at least not entirely. Mostly, Lucy realized, they were tears of anger.

"You won't forget lollipops though," Keynes smiled, reaching to take Izzy's hand. "Those you'll remember just fine."

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Izzy turned her head and let out a yell. It wasn't a scream; it was a name.

"*Petra!*" Izzy called, so loudly that her voice cracked.

"Now listen here," Keynes said, and grabbed for Izzy's hand. Izzy wrung it away from him and hugged her knees to her chest.

"Give the girl a moment," Percy snapped angrily, stepping to get between Izzy and Keynes. Keynes was too close to her, however. He reached for her again, his already pale face growing even paler with annoyance.

"PETRA!" Izzy called again. Her voice rang in the waiting area. The nurse behind the round desk was standing now, one hand covering her mouth and the other flat against her throat.

"Come along now," Keynes demanded, grabbing at Izzy. Lucy could bear it no longer. She jumped up, not even aware of what she was doing. She was holding Izzy's hand in her own and Izzy began to clamber after her.

"Oh no you don't—" Keynes cried, but was cut off as Izzy extended both of her feet at once, connecting with the man's thin chest. He sprawled backwards, knocking Percy aside. Both men fell to the floor.

"Stop her!" Keynes called, his knees poking up into the air as the court guards scrambled to help him up. "Forget about me! Get the girl!"

"Lucy, no!" Percy called out.

Lucy heard his voice but didn't so much as glance back as she ran, Izzy at her side. Hands grabbed at them as they sped through the archway into the main corridor, but the girls were young and quick. They ducked between the two guards flanking the entry and darted into the door-lined corridor, making for the stairs beyond.

It was completely hopeless, of course. They'd never make it out of the building and even if they did, where would they go? And yet, Lucy couldn't stop herself. She ran on, Izzy at her side, even as a red bolt struck the marble floor at her feet, sending up a burst of sparks.

"Petra," Izzy said, almost to herself, still running. "We have to find Petra..."



Not very far away, Albus followed along with the Clutchcudgel tournament, somewhat indirectly.

He'd stayed back at Ares Mansion as Team Werewolf geared up for the match and left, pausing only for their ceremonial rubbing of the bronze werewolf statue in the front garden. No one asked him why he was still there, not even his mates, Greunway and Shrum, since they had left an hour earlier to get good seats up in the grandstands. Albus watched through the tiny window in the center of the third-floor hall until the team was completely out of sight, their barking grunts lost in the increasing roar of the crowd. Then, as patiently as he could, Albus had waited.

He'd overheard Altaire and Jones talking in the parlor earlier that afternoon. Altaire had heard all about James' overtures to the other houses, seeking help in the Bigfoots' attempt to defeat the Werewolves. Both of them had laughed maliciously at this.

"Isn't it just like the Foots to ask the *losers* for help in beating the *winners*," Olivia Jones had observed, shaking her head. "They should have just come to us. We'd have given them the best advice of all: go home and hide under your beds, little Foots."

Altaire had chuckled. "We should teach them a lesson," he'd said, his voice hardening, "just for having the gall to try to rally the whole school against us. We should beat them into the ground like tent pegs even for trying. Make an example out of 'em."

"I have an idea," Jones had agreed and then lowered her voice. Half a minute later, Altaire had yodeled a laugh of pure spite. Albus hadn't liked the sound of that laugh although he hadn't heard the details of Jones' plan. It didn't matter, really. Team Werewolf's tactics were never particularly subtle. Probably, they meant to sacrifice a few penalties in favor of taking out a Bigfoot player or two. Albus only hoped that one of the players they eliminated wouldn't be James.

Albus hadn't known for sure what he intended to do, but at that moment, he had decided on a plan. It might not work, but then again, it just might.

Besides, it wasn't as if he would be sabotaging his own team. He would merely be evening the odds.

From his dormitory room, he'd listened to the ebb and roar of the crowd at nearby Pepperpock Down. He'd watched the clock impatiently. Finally, when it had gotten dark enough outside to hide his movements, he had crept out the front door of Ares Mansion and approached the statue of the snarling werewolf.

As before, he could hear the shouts and commands of Team Werewolf echoing from the statue's muzzle as if on a distant wireless frequency. Albus hunkered in the darkness, waiting for his moment to act. People were still moving along the nearby footpaths—latecomers to the match, hurrying toward Pepperpock Down. None of them noticed the boy hiding in the shadow of the werewolf statue, but Albus didn't mean to take any chances. He waited and listened, watching for the moment when no one would observe his actions.

Faintly, via the mysterious statue, he heard Altaire's instructions, shouted to his teammates as the match approached halftime. He could even hear the dull thumps and exclamations as the players collided in air or the buzzing whooshes of the game magic spells. Albus could tell that Team Bigfoot was holding their own against the Wolves, although not well enough to take the lead.

Of course not, Albus thought sourly, *they don't have Liquid Luck on their side.* He glanced up at the werewolf statue as he listened. Its eyes glowed faintly, coppery in the last light of the sunset.

Finally, just as Albus was preparing to act, he heard Altaire call out a command, directed at that block-headed prat, Parker Pentz.

Number nine! Do it now! Phase one, Operation Achilles!

A moment later, a heavy thump and yelp of pain emanated from the statue's mouth. Albus heard Altaire's wicked laugh as the unfortunate Bigfoot player screamed, falling away from his assailant.

Nearby, drowning out the thin broadcast of the statue, the crowd roared in Pepperpock Down's grandstands.

Albus didn't know what happened next, but he assumed that the Bigfoot player was all right, more or less, since the match continued shortly thereafter.

It was nearly halftime. Albus thought that that was probably the best time to act. He waited for the halftime horn to sound and then climbed carefully to his feet, producing his wand from the sheath in his sleeve. He stood in front of the statue's glowing eyes, hearing the distant whoops and barks of his team as they congregated for halftime, and then raised his wand.

He opened his mouth to speak the incantation—*Convulsis* was the spell he had chosen after some consideration—but the words stopped in his throat as the werewolf statue *blinked*. It moved, shaking its shaggy bronze neck and turning very slightly, as if to face Albus directly. The amber eyes narrowed and a low growl, almost like the purr of a very large cat, emanated from deep within the thing's metal throat.

Albus froze. This, he had not at all expected. His mouth moved, framing the words of the spell, but he couldn't speak. Fear had closed off his breath. The statue's eyes flared brighter and Albus sensed it preparing to pounce on him, to crush him under its weight. He had time to think, *Did Havershift enchant it to recognize when it was being threatened, and to defend itself? Is that even possible?* Obviously, it was. The truth wrinkled its bronze lips back from its bronze teeth and the growl grew louder, announcing its intention to strike.

And then, suddenly, a hand closed on Albus' wrist, pushing his arm upright.

"Halt right there, Cornelius," a voice commanded stridently. "Drop the wand. Now!"

Albus didn't obey. He barely heard the words. He continued to stare wildly at the crouching werewolf shape before him, but most of the light suddenly seemed to have gone from its eyes. It was no longer moving or growling.

"I said *drop* it!" the voice commanded again. The hand holding Albus' wrist tightened painfully and Albus' hand spasmed, releasing his wand. It fell silently into the grass in front of the statue. Albus finally looked aside and found himself staring into the face of Dayton Englewood, a senior Werewolf student and member in good standing of Professor Jackson's Salem Dirgus Free Militia. Englewood's crew cut bristled and his wide pockmarked face was set with a sweaty gleam of triumph.

"Looks like I caught me a spy," he said with grim glee. "A spy and a saboteur."

Despite his fear and frustration, Albus rolled his eyes. "Great," he said wearily. "Just what you've always wanted."



"Gobbins!" James shouted hoarsely. "Overhead! Brick wall! Now!"

Gobbins acted immediately, stopping his skrim in midair as if he had struck a solid wall and dropping flat onto its surface with the Clutch held beneath him, protected. The Werewolf Bullies swooped over him, barely missing his head as he hunkered down. Instantly, Gobbins sprang up again, rocketing forward, now following the Bullies, drafting behind them. They boggled back at him and then jerked upwards out of the course under the influence of Wentworth's gravity well.

There was no time to celebrate even as Gobbins swept on toward the goal. The other two Clutches were in the Werewolves' possession. James leaned over his skrim, driving it forward so

quickly that the rings flashed past like fence posts. He caught up to one of the Werewolf Clippers, Olivia Jones, and fired a Zombie hex at her. Somehow, uncannily, Jones jiggled to the left at just the right moment, causing the spell to deflect from the center ring as she passed through it. James cursed loudly to himself and ducked through the melee of the center ring, still chasing Jones.

They were only five minutes into the second half when James swooped past Clayton Altaire, who let out a guttural bark of triumph.

"Number four!" he shouted, apparently to one of his teammates. "Phase two! Now!"

James didn't know what the call meant. A few seconds later, however, a piercing howl rang out over the course. James was so surprised that he nearly fell off his skrim. He swooped out of the course and spun around in a tight corkscrew. There was only one person in the rings who could make a sound like that. Sure enough, Mukthatch had fallen onto his skrim, holding his right knee in pain. His Keeper's Cudgel was spinning lazily as it fell toward the field far below.

"On no!" Jazmine cried helplessly, dismay and rage evident in her voice. "Not Muk! What'd they do!"

"They buzzed him," Troy Covington called from the opposite end of the course. "On purpose!"

James flew over to the platform and jumped off his skrim, landing next to Professor Wood, whose face was set in a hard frown.

"They shot Muk!" James declared angrily, pointing. "And that was no accident! What spell was it?"

"Inertia Charm," Wood answered tersely. "Great for thrown Clutches, terrible for human bones. Or Sasquatch bones for that matter."

Professor Sanuye was towing Mukthatch toward the platform using a Lanyard Charm. His whistle poked from between his teeth. On his skrim, Mukthatch groaned, still clutching his right knee.

"Medical College, immediately," Sanuye announced as Wood helped Mukthatch off his skrim.

"They did that deliberately," Wood said to the match official. "You know that, right?"

"Miss Brazil says it was an accident," Sanuye replied evenly.

"Linton Brazil is a cheat and a liar!" James exclaimed, but Wood raised a hand, silencing him.

"Your word against hers," Sanuye said, shaking his head slowly. "Either way, you're down by two players, Professor. You don't intend to finish the match, do you?"

"Absolutely!" Gobbins cried, landing on the other side of the platform. Jazmine and the rest of the diminished team were close behind. As they landed, two medical students in green tunics appeared on the platform to examine Mukthatch's knee. They shook their heads gravely and began to splint the knee in preparation for the trip back to the Medical College.

"I'd strongly advise you to forfeit," Sanuye said, still speaking to Wood. "You may choose to contest the results at a later time. Frankly, I'd testify to the board that you deserve a tie. Team Werewolf would still receive a technical victory, but you'd save your team the embarrassment of losing rather miserably. A squad two players short is a lost cause, I'm afraid."

Wood considered this stoically. He looked out over the remainder of the team.

"No way," James declared, shaking his head. "We can't give up! They're trying to force us out, one by one, because they know they can't beat us in a clean match!"

"Right you may be, James," Wood nodded, "but Professor Sanuye is right. We're two players down. I don't see that we have much of a choice."

"But we *can't* give up!" James insisted, looking around at the team. "That's what they *want* us to do!"

"Maybe we should, though," Jazmine suggested sadly. "I mean, if we can at least get a technical tie game like Professor Sanuye says..."

Troy Covington nodded. "It's better than getting completely destroyed in the rings at least. I sure don't want to risk any more 'accidents' at the hands of those maniacs." He shot a dark look at the platform across the way.

"Face it," Wentworth added, stripping off his gauntlets and throwing them down onto the platform floor. "Playing a clean game is just no match for 'all's fair in love and war'."

The rest of the team muttered agreement.

"Shall we take a vote?" Wood asked, raising his voice.

"What's the point?" Gobbins declared angrily, glancing around at his teammates. "Let's just get out of here."

He made his way toward the stairs that descended through the center of the platform and the rest of the team followed, discouraged into silence.

Gobbins stopped on the second step, however, as the sound of clumping footsteps rang up from below. James watched as Gobbins backed up off the stairs again, making way for the newcomer. A head with very short dark hair appeared from below followed by a stocky body with arms like tree trunks. The figure was carrying Mukthatch's skrim and wearing an ill-fitting Bigfoot jersey.

"You need a reserve player?" the figure asked seriously, glancing around at the wide-eyed members of Team Bigfoot.

"You're Viktor Krum!" Wentworth exclaimed suddenly, pointing a finger at the big man. "I've got your Chocolate Frog card back in my room!"

Krum smiled gravely.

"Viktor," Wood said, stepping forward and shaking the man's hand. "Good to see you. Especially under these circumstances."

"Is it legal?" James asked impatiently, glancing around at Professor Sanuye. "Can he actually play for us?"

Sanuye nodded consideringly. "Every house has their own rules for who can play on their team," he said. "The official Alma Aleron rulebook only states that a simple majority of any team must be students from that team's house of origin. Mr. Krum may indeed play if he wishes and if you'll have him."

"But *can* he play?" Covington asked. "I mean, no offense, Mr. Krum, but do you even know how to fly a skrim?"

"Are you *skrewt poop?*" Wentworth exclaimed, nearly beside himself. "He's Viktor zarking Krum! He can do *anything!*"

Without a word, Viktor tossed Mukthatch's skrim into the air. As it came down next to him, the big man hopped easily onto it. It bobbed with him on it and he directed it in a quick corkscrew swoop, ending in a ready crouch, his hands held out flat on either side.

"I once played for Bulgarian Clutchcudgel Minor League," he admitted with a grin. "It's not Quidditch, but sport is sport, yes?"

"Sport is definitely sport," Wood agreed, matching the big man's grin. "Professor Sanuye? It would appear that the Bigfoots are not quite prepared to give up just yet." All around him, Team Bigfoot cheered fervently.

Sanuye nodded. A moment later, he turned his broom away from the platform and swept out over the center ring. He blew his whistle and the babbling crowd fell quiet.

"Penalty, Team Werewolf. Careless use of magic. Five minutes in the dock."

The crowd roared approval as the members of Team Werewolf cried out angrily, denouncing the call. James grinned as he jumped back onto his skrim. Careless use of magic carried a much harsher penalty than mere accidental buzzing, which enforced only two minutes in the dock. Linton Brazil would be out of the match for the rest of the third quarter, making the teams even once again, at least for the moment.

"And in a *shocking* turn of events," Cheshire Chatterly called from the announcer's booth, "Team Bigfoot gains a surprise reserve player in the form of Mr. Viktor Krum, world-renowned Harrier, athlete and participant in the famed Triwizard Tournament! Team Werewolf faces a stiff but fair penalty at the hands of match official Sanuye, and the match resumes with the Wolves leading by a score of seventy-six to sixty-five!"

James heard the whistle as the match plowed once again into motion. He watched as Viktor Krum immediately snagged one of the loose Clutches and tucked it under his huge arm.

This match isn't over yet, he thought, and plunged eagerly into the fracas.



Lucy and Izzy clambered down into the dark stairwell. Voices rang out behind them, but they echoed so that Lucy couldn't tell how close their pursuers were.

"We can't just keep running, Iz!" Lucy panted, but Izzy paid no attention. The two girls darted around a corner and pushed through a heavy door. There were no windows here and a sign overhead was lit with red light: '*Experimental Medicine and Elixirs—No Admittance!*'

Izzy ran on, her blonde curls flying. Lucy followed, glancing back the way they had come.

"Petra," Izzy moaned again, looking around wildly. "She's here! I feel her. She's dreaming!"

"Izzy, Petra's in an enchanted sleep!" Lucy insisted. "They gave her the poison apple! Nothing will wake her up until they *want* her to wake!"

Izzy didn't seem to hear Lucy. She turned and pushed through a set of swinging double doors.

"There!" a voice echoed behind Lucy. She glanced back and saw two of the court agents bursting through the stairwell doors. Their faces glowed crimson in the light of the overhead sign. One of the men pointed his wand and shouted. A Stunning Spell burst against the pale green brick wall next to Lucy, showering her with red sparks.

"*Lubricus!*" Lucy cried, flinging her own wand out.

Both men suddenly flailed wildly, as if the marble floor beneath them was coated with ice. They slid into the walls, one on each side, overcorrected, and then bounced off of each other, collapsing messily to the corridor floor.

Lucy spun and ran again, following Izzy through the swinging double doors.

The walls here were black tile, shiny in the overhead lights. The room itself was low and wide, packed with aisles of shelves. Lucy had been to the Ministry of Magic many times and was reminded of the Department of Mysteries. Here, however, the shelves were crammed with stoppered jars of coloured liquid, each labeled in glowing green ink. Izzy was looking around at the shelves, helplessly.

"She's nearby," she moaned. She looked up at Lucy, her eyes pleading. "I can feel her. She's close. She's dreaming. She's dreaming of us!"

"Stop, Izzy, please," Lucy plead. "It's useless. You can't wake her even if you do find her. Do you understand? Maybe we can talk to the people, try once more to convince them not to take away your memory. My father can hel—"

A burst of red shattered one of the vials on a nearby shelf, startling both girls. They ducked and clambered away as more spells lit the air. Izzy spun at the end of one of the aisles and grabbed a large jar. Her face was etched with fear and rage as she flung it. The jar arced over Lucy's head and shattered loudly on the marble floor, directly in front of the approaching court agents. Fire leapt up from the jar's liquid contents and engulfed the men. They shrieked in unison as they scrambled forward, beating at their clothes to extinguish the red flames. Lucy had only a moment to realize that the flames weren't fire, however; they were leaves. Red vines and bright red flowers grew with lightning speed from the released liquid, entwining the men's arms and legs, attaching to their grey tunics.

"Stop!" one of the men shouted, tugging at the vines. "Stop in the name of the wizarding law of the United States!"

"Sod off!" Lucy shouted back. A moment later, she and Izzy doubled back to the main doors, banging through them even as the court agents fired Repelling Spells at the red vines, releasing themselves.

"If you see her," Lucy asked as they ran on, "if you see Petra, Iz, will you stop running?"

"Yes!" Izzy cried out eagerly.

Lucy nodded. "I know where she is," she said. "Follow me."

Izzy had been right, after all. Petra had been very close. She had been exactly one floor below them, in the lowest basement of the Medical College.

Glancing back only once, the two girls found the rear stairwell and began to clamber down into the darkness below.



"What were you planning to do?" Dayton Englewood demanded, pushing his face so close to Albus' that he completely blocked the view of the tiny Ares Mansion dungeon.

"I *told* you," Albus replied in irritation, "I was giving old Wolfy a little haircut. That's all. Shaggy fur is *so* last year."

"Laugh all you want, Cornelius," Englewood growled, narrowing his eyes. "You won't be laughing when Professor Jackson gets here. He'll nail you to the wall. I've seen it happen, you know. He doesn't take kindly to saboteurs."

"I'm sure he doesn't," Albus agreed. "What'd you do with my wand?"

Englewood smiled thinly. "I confiscated it. You'll probably never see it again. They don't allow wands where *you're* going."

"Really?" Albus said, shifting on the hard bench in the corner of the dungeon. "So you Americans are in the habit of sending blokes to Fort Bedlam just for pointing wands at statues? Sounds pretty touchy if you ask me. Maybe you should consider growing a bit thicker hide."

"Shut up, Cornelius," Englewood suggested, lowering his own wand a little, but not completely. "It's just a good thing I was coming back late from my last exam. Who knows what you might have done?"

"That's pretty late for an exam, isn't it?" Albus replied, unable to stop himself. "The pointy end of the quill goes *down*, you know. The fluffy end points *up*. Tough one to remember, that."

"Shut *up*, I said!" Englewood commanded, raising his wand again. "You think I want to be here guarding your sorry English butt? I'm missing the tournament match!"

Albus rolled his eyes and slumped on the wooden bench. "Ah, you're not missing anything," he muttered. "Same old song and dance."

At that point, a dull thump and a series of heavy footsteps sounded overhead. Englewood glanced up and then showed Albus a toothy grin.

"That's Professor Jackson," he said smugly. "I sent for him by pigeon, interrupted him right in the middle of the match. *Boy*, will he be mad at you."

"Yeah," Albus nodded. "Dangerous prisoner like me definitely couldn't have waited until after the tournament was over. I bet he'll give you a medal even."

Englewood's grin faltered for a moment. Footsteps knocked loudly on the stone stairs of the dungeon as Professor Jackson descended, his black waistcoat buttoned all the way to his chin. Englewood spun around to face him. He saluted with fierce efficiency.

"I've captured a spy, General!" he shouted, snapping to attention. "He was engaged in the act of sabotage when I discovered him and apprehended him. I have been guarding him ever since, awaiting instructions."

Jackson glanced at Englewood and then shifted his gaze to Albus, his expression unchanging. Slowly, he looked back at Englewood again.

"This is Albus Potter, Englewood," Jackson said, apparently struggling to keep his voice even. "He is a member of this house."

"Sir! He is a spy, sir!" Englewood barked, saluting again. "I caught him attempting to sabotage the werewolf statue out front!"

Jackson closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. When he opened them again, he was looking at Albus.

"Is this true, Mr. Potter?" he asked tiredly.

"Yes sir," Albus answered honestly. There didn't seem to be any point in lying about it. "I was planning to blast it a hard one right between the eyes. It was on the edge of attacking me."

"Attacking you," Jackson repeated. "The statue, you say, was attacking you."

"Sir, yes sir." Albus nodded easily.

Jackson drew a long, deep breath. When he let it out, he returned his attention to Englewood. "Could this not, perhaps, have waited for the end of the match, Private?"

"The spy presented a clear and present danger, sir!" Englewood declared, his face going red. He glanced back over his shoulder at Albus. "He, er, was engaged in covert activities!"

"He was pulling a prank, Private," Jackson sighed. "At best. I cannot imagine why he was doing it, but I admit that I have never quite understood the thought processes of the Potter family. Frustrating as they may be, they are relatively harmless, I assure you."

Englewood snapped his heels together and stood so straight that he looked like he meant to rocket up through the low dungeon ceiling. "Sir! What are your orders, sir?"

Jackson closed his eyes again and rubbed them with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. "I order you both," he said patiently, "to accompany me back to Pepperpock Down for the remainder of the tournament match. It was, you may be interested to know, just getting good."

"Sir, yes sir!" Englewood barked again, snapping off yet another salute.

"At ease, Private," Jackson growled. A moment later, he beckoned for Albus to follow him. In single file, Albus in the middle, the three made their way back up the dungeon stairs and through the mansion's main hall.

"I hesitate to ask this, Mr. Potter," Jackson said as the front door slammed behind them, "but why, pray tell, were you pointing your wand at the werewolf statue?"

"Like I said," Albus answered, still seeing no need to lie, "I planned to destroy it. At least a little."

Jackson shook his head slowly. "I doubt you'd have succeeded in any case," he said wryly. "But *why*, young man?"

Albus paused and stopped. Englewood nearly ran into him from behind. His wand was still out, pointing at his prisoner, and Albus felt it poke him harmlessly in the back. Englewood dropped it and cursed urgently to himself, scrambling to pick it up again.

Three paces away, Jackson stopped as well. He turned and looked back, his eyes impatient but curious.

Albus tilted his head toward the bronze statue. It stood unmoving next to him, its muzzle frozen in its characteristic snarl.

"Do you really," he said, turning back to the professor, "want to know?"



By the end of the third quarter of the tournament match, Team Werewolf had succeeded in taking out yet one more Bigfoot player. This time, Troy Covington had received a blindsight hit with a skrim, right in the middle of the back. Covington had fallen from his skrim, completely unconscious, while the Werewolf Bully, Pentz, had collected the dropped Clutch and flown on without a backward glance.

Sanuye had succeeded in levitating Covington just as he had Norrick. The penalty had been called—ten more minutes in the dock for dangerous maneuvering—and Pentz had landed on the Werewolves' platform, no longer grinning but grimacing smugly.

"Professor Jackson's not even in the stands," Gobbins panted, swooping in next to James and pointing. "The Wolves always play dirty, but even *he* wouldn't have allowed a brazen hit like that. They're taking advantage of the fact that he's not here!"

James swore loudly and glanced back at his own platform. What he saw there gladdened his heart even if the match seemed increasingly hopeless. Several members of the other House Clutch teams stood on the platform, surrounding Professor Wood. Every one of them wore a Bigfoot jersey and held their skrims at their sides. Warrington was first in line. As Covington was lowered gently onto a waiting stretcher, Warrington hopped onto his skrim and swooped out into the rings.

"It's his grand poobahness!" James announced gamely.

"Welcome to the jungle, Warrington," Jazmine Jade called. "Thanks for coming!"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Warrington said. "Zane says howdy by the way. And if you *ever* remind me that I once wore a Bigfoot jersey, I'll paint your house with Plimpy puke. See if I don't."

James nodded. "Point taken."

"Is it break time?" Viktor Krum called as he swept past. "Or is a match going on?"

Warrington frowned. “Into the breach!” he called, and leaned over his skrim, following Krum. A moment later, James and Gobbins followed. The Bigfoots were still behind—no matter how many goals they scored, the Werewolves always, infuriatingly, managed to keep a slim but stubborn lead. James refused to think about it. As he had thought several minutes earlier, the match wasn’t over yet. The Foots still had a chance, no matter how slim.

James flashed through the center ring and snatched a floating Clutch. He pointed his wand, called out one of the Pixies’ proprietary speed charms, and rocketed forward in a blur.



Lucy and Izzy made it to the bottom of the narrow stairwell and pushed through the heavy door. It was very dark in the corridor and a pair of guards stood at the end, flanking the last doorway. They looked up as the two girls approached.

“This is a restricted area, sweetheart,” one of the guards called to Lucy. He was young with a Southern accent.

“Don’t call me sweetheart,” Lucy instructed, raising her wand. Her Stunning Spell struck the young guard in the shoulder and he collapsed like a bag of cauldrons. The other guard watched this in disbelief, not even thinking to reach for his own wand.

“Oh no you didn’t,” he said, looking up at Lucy and frowning. He was finally reaching for his wand, but it was too late.

“Oh yes I did,” Lucy replied. “Sorry.”

She winced as her Stunning Spell struck the second guard. He crumpled on top of his mate, dropping his wand. Sometimes, Lucy thought, it helped to be a young girl.

“They’re coming,” Izzy said urgently. “I sense them. Petra’s dreaming of them.”

“She’s just beyond that door,” Lucy shrugged, pointing. “Go ahead, Iz. Go see her. Do what you have to do.”

Izzy trotted forward, clambering easily over the fallen guards. Lucy thought the heavy metal door would be locked, but when Izzy turned the handle it opened easily, swinging silently on its hinges. Izzy disappeared quickly inside.

Lucy stepped gingerly over the guards and stood just outside the open door. It was dark inside the cell. The walls were blank stone with no windows. A narrow metal bed stood in the exact center of the room beneath a dim lamp. Petra lay on the bed, uncovered, clothed in the same drab dress she had been wearing on the day that they had arrested her. Izzy stood beside the bed and clasped one of Petra's hands.

"Petra!" she said fervently. "Wake up! They're coming to get me! They're going to make me forget you and everybody else! They're going to send us away from each other! You have to wake up and help me!"

Lucy watched, frustrated anger and fear settling over her like a wet blanket. Petra lay on the bed still as stone, her eyes closed peacefully. Lucy could make out the shape of Petra's eyes beneath her lids. They didn't so much as flinch.

"Petra!" Izzy insisted in an urgent whisper. "Wake up! Please! Don't let them take me! They're coming! You're dreaming of them! I can see it in your thoughts even now!"

"Izzy," Lucy whispered, shaking her head. "She can't. She would if she could, but she can't. Do you understand? It isn't Petra's fault."

"No!" Izzy wailed, raising her voice, not taking her eyes from the sleeping shape of her sister. "She *will* wake up! She *has* to!"

A door banged open at the end of the dark corridor. Lucy looked back the way they had come and saw figures emerging into the dim light. Keynes was in the lead, his face hard. Lucy's father was close behind him.

"Lucy!" he called, his voice echoing in the low corridor. "Put your wand down, love! Please stop!" Then, to the others, he said, "If any of you raise a wand to my daughter, I will have your badges before the International Wizarding Court, I swear it."

"Come out, Izabella," Keynes demanded. All the sweetness had gone out of his voice. "You are only making this hard on yourself."

Lucy turned back to the small room. Izzy had not looked up from her sister. Petra, of course, had not moved in the slightest.

"Petra," Izzy cried, still clinging to the young woman's hand with both of her own, "don't leave me alone with them! Don't let them make me forget you!"

"Stand back, young lady," Keynes demanded, pushing Lucy aside. Her father stopped next to her and put his hand on her shoulder. He shook his head down at her, both sadly and warningly.

"Izabella Morganstern," Keynes said, striding into the room, "come this moment. I don't wish to Stun you."

He grabbed her, one hand on each shoulder. Izzy screamed and wriggled beneath his grip, but Keynes was no longer wasting any effort. His grip on her was like a vice. He turned her around even as Izzy still clung to her sister's hand.

"Petra!" Izzy gasped, tears running down her face again. "Don't let them! Petra, please!"

Lucy watched helplessly as Keynes pushed her toward the door. He stopped only to grasp Izzy's small fingers and pry them away from Petra's hand. The hand fell away limply and hung next to the narrow bed, the fingers curled loosely in sleep.

Izzy screamed, loudly this time, making no words. Keynes' face was hard as stone as he maneuvered Izzy through the door, which she clung to uselessly. Lucy reached to comfort the girl, but Keynes pushed her hand away, giving her a black look. A moment later, he dragged Izzy down the corridor toward the basement stairwell. The court agents followed along, cutting off Lucy's view of the blond girl. One of them remained by the door, his wand in his hand, standing over the Stunned guards.

"I'm so sorry, Lu," her father said, his hand still on her shoulder. "There's nothing I can do."

"PETRA!" Izzy screamed once more through her tears. The sound of it rang in the hall like a gong and Lucy realized that she herself was crying. She turned to look back through the open doorway of Petra's cell. The girl lay on the bed like a corpse, her eyes closed peacefully, her hand hanging limply to the side, pale in the lamplight.

"PETRA!" Izzy's voice shrieked, cracking, and then, frantically, echoing as the girl was pushed into the stairwell: "MORGAN! Help me! *HELP ME!*"

And on the bed, Petra's eyes flickered. They fluttered, opened, and then turned aside as Petra rolled her head toward the door, meeting Lucy's astonished gaze.

Coldness rushed out of the room like a gust of wind, streaming through Lucy's hair and clothes. Lucy gasped at the frigid blast and raised an arm to shield her eyes from its force.

When she looked again, the narrow bed in the dark room was empty.



"Are you quite certain of this?" Professor Jackson asked flatly, studying Albus' face.

"Teach-cheat don't lie," Albus said, nodding toward the pink paper in Professor Jackson's hands. Albus had realized that he'd been carrying the tiny paper in his blazer pocket ever since the day he'd used it to test the statue. It looked very small in Jackson's big knuckly fingers.

"Indeed it does not," Jackson stated gravely.

"He could've gotten that from anywhere!" Englewood cried. "There's no way of knowing if that stuff came from the statue! It's a trick! Got to be!"

Jackson narrowed his eyes at Albus. Slowly, he lowered the teach-cheat and pushed it into the pocket of his waistcoat. When the professor's hand reappeared, it was holding his wand.

"You may be right, Mr. Englewood," Jackson replied in a low, smooth voice. "This is, after all, an extremely serious allegation."

"Damn straight," Englewood agreed, giving Albus a beady-eyed glare.

Jackson raised his wand. Albus felt a moment of raw panic as the wand seemed to level at him. He glanced around, remembering that his own wand had been confiscated by Englewood. He was defenseless. And then, with a monumental sense of relief, he saw what the professor was really pointing at.

"There's only one way to find out," Jackson said, obviously reluctant to do what he was about to do. He stared down the length of his wand and trained it on the werewolf's bronze head, just past Albus' shoulder.

The wolf growled, loudly this time.

Albus spun around, his eyes going wide, and ducked aside. If the statue meant to tackle its opponent, Albus did *not* wish to be between them.

Professor Jackson called his spell at exactly the same moment that the bronze werewolf pounced.

"*Expulso!*" Jackson thundered, raising his arm instinctively to match the metal beast's motion. The spell struck the statue in midair, producing a blinding purple flash which was, strangely, perfectly silent.

Albus dropped to the ground and covered his head with his hands. Bits of statue rained down like hail, peppering him, none larger than his pinky finger. When the rain of bronze bits was over, Albus raised his head, his eyes wild.

The rear half of the statue was mostly intact. It lay sideways on the grass, six feet from its base. The rest of the statue was spread around the lawn like a corona, thousands of tiny bits glinting in the yellow moonlight.

"Well then," Jackson said, his own eyes wide as he pocketed his wand, "let us proceed to the tournament match, then. We shall see what effect, if any, this turn of events has on the outcome."

"Er, what about him?" Albus asked, climbing to his feet and glancing back toward Englewood.

Jackson peered over his shoulder at the boy. He lay on his back in the grass, his arms and legs splayed in a dead faint.

"Leave him," Jackson sighed. "If he'd have saluted once more, I'd have Stunned him myself."



James sensed the change immediately. He couldn't put his finger on what it was, but it was evident nonetheless.

For one thing, Pentz dropped the Clutch. James had been chasing him, trying to aim a Lanyard Charm, when the leather ball had simply popped out from beneath the boy's arm. James could scarcely believe it and almost forgot to grab for the Clutch as he sped past. An instant later, he hugged it against his chest and leaned over his skrim, hardly believing his luck. He rocketed past Pentz, who was glancing around confusedly, comically.

"What happened?" Warrington demanded, swooping in next to James to escort him through his laps.

"He fumbled!" James called, swooping through the center ring and ducking beneath a Werewolf Bully. "Straight up dropped it! It nearly hit me in the face!"

"Well, don't waste it!" Warrington advised, aiming a Bonefuse Hex at a Werewolf Clipper. "We're only down by four! We can still take this match!"

James nodded as he completed his second lap. He expected to be fallen upon by Werewolf Bullies, but as he glanced around, he was amazed to see that his course was almost completely clear. In fact, most of the Werewolves seemed to have fallen into a sort of confused fugue. They had slowed in their path through the rings. One of them, Olivia Jones, had completely missed one of the far rings and had been forced to relinquish her Clutch. She stared dumbly down at her own hands and then back at the ring she had flown past. There were no Bigfoot Bullies around her at all. She had simply missed the ring.

"What's happened to them?" Warrington called wonderingly, glancing around. "They act like somebody pulled the plug on 'em!"

"It won't last, whatever it is," James replied, raising his voice into the rushing wind of the course. "Stay on top of it! If they take out one more Bigfoot, we'll have to forfeit the match!"

Warrington nodded grimly as James spun around on his skrim, lobbing the Clutch toward the goal ring. Dunckel, the Werewolf Keeper, wasn't even watching. The Clutch sailed through the goal and James glanced toward the scoreboard as he flew on, watching the numbers change.

"With only ninety seconds left in tonight's incredible match-up," Cheshire Chatterly cried exuberantly, "Team Bigfoot closes within three points of the reigning champions! *What a match, folks!*"

James sped on. He sensed the Werewolves recovering from the mysterious confusion that had overtaken them. Altaire swooped in next to him as they passed through the center ring. They both grabbed for the single remaining Clutch, but Altaire body-checked James, knocking him violently out of the course. The Werewolf captain glanced back angrily as he sped on, holding the Clutch under his arm. Even as he looked back, however, Jazmine Jade fell in next to him. James hurled himself forward, attempting to catch up.

"Hey Altaire," Jazmine called out, giving her voice a very uncharacteristic lilt. James was shocked to see the big girl place one hand behind her head and the other on her waist. She cocked her hip toward the Werewolf captain and smiled at him, all while rocketing along next to him, skrim for skrim. "You're such a big bad wolf," she trilled, fluttering her eyes at Altaire. "How'd you like to huff and puff and blow *my* house down?"

Altaire did a complete double take at Jazmine, apparently forgetting for the moment where he was. A split second later, he spanged headlong into one of the passing rings, dropping the Clutch as his skrim squirted away into the night. Jazmine caught the Clutch easily, tucked it beneath her arm, and hunkered over her skrim.

"Wow!" James called to her, his eyes wide with disbelief. "That Veela thing is pretty amazing when you turn it on!" He glanced back and saw Altaire dangling gamely from the ring he'd crashed into.

"If you've got it," Jazmine called, grinning sheepishly, "flaunt it."

As Jazmine scored, James saw that the Werewolves were only ahead by two points. Ten seconds later, Viktor Krum socked home another goal, hurling the Clutch so hard that it knocked the Cudgel clean out of Dunckel's hand. The crowd exploded into deafening cheers, stomping their feet and waving banners wildly against the night.

"Two more and we win!" Gobbins shouted, grinning with disbelief. "We're gonna do it!"

James nodded. The Werewolves had been merciless in their attack on Team Bigfoot and had apparently been infuriated by the line of players from other houses gathering to play reserve for the underdog team. Only minutes earlier, Wentworth had gotten forced into a collision with a Werewolf Bully, jamming most of the fingers on his right hand. He had sworn loudly and even bared his teeth at the Werewolf Bully before being pulled away by Jazmine and Gobbins. By the time Pixie captain Ophelia Wright subbed in for Wentworth, nearly half of the team had become comprised of players from other houses. If only one more native player got removed from the match, Team Bigfoot would have to forfeit.

James tried not to worry about it. The last thing the team could afford right now was to be careful.

Thinking this, James rammed through the center ring, collecting the Clutch that Krum had just scored with. He tossed it aside to Gobbins and fell in behind him, meaning to escort him through his laps. Two Werewolf Bullies dropped instantly alongside, moving to flank Gobbins.

Now's as good a time as ever, James thought, pressing his lips together tightly. He leaned severely into the wind, driving his skrim wildly forward, and reached toward the button the Igors had installed on the end of his skrim. He pounded it with the flat of his hand.

Beneath his skrim, a small box popped open. James knew what was in the box: a tiny photograph of a babelthrush spore and a curled length of Bamboozle vine that James had asked Professor Longbottom to send to him. As the box opened, the Bamboozle transformed into a cloud of fat pink babelthrush spores. The Werewolf Bullies flew through the spores, which peppered their goggles and chests. Immediately, the Bullies corkscrewed off course, swiping at their goggles and dissolving into fits of sneezes.

That's the last of our tricks, James thought as Gobbins lobbed the Clutch through the goal ring, tying the match. *From here on out, it's just us!*

The crowd roared constantly now as the final seconds of the match ticked away. James heard Cheshire Chatterly's voice echoing wildly from the announcer's booth, but he couldn't make out any of her actual words. He leaned completely sideways on his skrim as he powered through the figure eight course, passing Werewolves and Bigfoots on both sides. As he ripped through the center ring, he managed to grab two Clutches, one in each hand. Amazingly, there were no Werewolves challenging him for them. He tucked one under each arm, leaned over his skrim, and grimaced into the oncoming wind. He completed the first lap easily, almost effortlessly, and was halfway through his second when a voice cried out.

"James!" Krum called distantly. James barely stopped to look. When he did, he saw Krum waving wildly at him, pointing. "Behind you!"

James peered back over his shoulder. The entirety of Team Werewolf was stacked up behind him, gaining on him, their faces set into grim lines of resolve. Most of them had their wands out, aiming at him.

They're going to take me out! James thought, and panic ripped through him. *They don't care if their whole team gets penalized! If they knock me out of the match, there won't be enough native Bigfoots left on the team and we'll have to forfeit! Team Werewolf will get a technical victory!*

Even as this realization formed in James' mind, a blast of red sparks sizzled over his shoulder, barely missing him. It hadn't been a Lanyard Charm or a gravity well. The Werewolves were using dueling spells.

"James, look out!" Jazmine cried from somewhere far behind, but it was no use. James ducked and swooped back and forth, struggling to stay inside the rings while simultaneously avoiding being struck. More magical bolts lit the air all around. Sanuye was blowing his whistle repeatedly, but the Wolves weren't stopping. They were desperate, and in their desperation, they were willing to do anything. James felt a sudden wriggle of real fright. It spread through him like ice, freezing him. He scrambled for his wand, fumbling one of the Clutches. He stripped the thin

wooden shaft out of his gauntlet and then dropped *it* as well. It spun away into the darkness and he stared after it, petrified.

Something thumped against his chest as he leaned over. He scrambled at it, worried that it was a Lanyard Charm, or worse. With some amazement, he realized that it was a small cloth pouch, both soft and dense to the touch. It hung around his neck on a length of rawhide string: the Vampires' game curse! He had been so intent on getting the rest of the team to take the Vampires' potion powders off before the match that he had completely forgotten to remove his own!

Without thinking, he grabbed at the short fluttering ripcord. He pulled it, and felt the pouch pop open. Black powder exploded from it, streaming backwards instantly into his wake. It engulfed the trailing Werewolves, covering them in writhing black tendrils. James glanced back, struggling to stay on his own skrim while holding onto the last Clutch.

The tendrils of black powder solidified around the Werewolves, forming a sort of loose net. Then, violently, it contracted. The black net pulled tight, sucking the entirety of Team Werewolf into a monstrous collision. If the game curse had been deployed on a single player, it would surely have forced them to momentarily lose control of their skrim, sending them off course. Deployed on the entire team, however, the effect was both sickly amusing and utterly devastating. The team crashed instantly in midair, pulled together by the force of the magical black net. A second later, the net vanished into smoke and the Werewolves fell out of it, scrambling to stay on their skims, grabbing at one another, spiraling away in every direction.

Breathlessly, James turned back to the course. Somehow, he had managed not to miss a single ring. He raised the final Clutch, held it over his shoulder, and tossed it easily through the goal ring. No one was guarding it. The Clutch sailed through so cleanly that James caught it himself, coming through on the other side.

The crowd erupted into a single riotous cheer. The scoreboard flickered, reflecting the change in the score: ninety-seven to ninety-eight. Team Bigfoot, including the several reserve players, collapsed around James, laughing wildly and hoisting him up over them.

The horn sounded, echoing deafeningly over the grandstands. The match was over.

Team Bigfoot had won.



23. THE BEGINNING OF THE END

For the Bigfoots, most winning matches had ended in a victorious evening's celebration at the Kite and Key, crowded around a few tables in their usual corner, quaffing Butterbeers and licorice sodas. The ending of the tournament match, however, launched a major event that nearly the entire campus turned out to watch.

Thanks to the Werewolves' recent string of championship victories (due in no small part to the now destroyed werewolf statue), the March of the Houses had not been witnessed at Alma Aleron for over a decade. Apart from the teachers, hardly anyone had ever seen it. Ares Mansion had become a fixture on Victory Hill, and many had begun to think that it would never move again. They might have been right if Albus had not discovered the secret of Stafford Havershift's bewitched werewolf statue. Even now, already, rumors about the broken bronze statue were circulating among the student populace. James heard snippets of them, although he wouldn't hear Albus' complete story until later, during the journey home. Some students were whispering that the statue had been magical and had come alive, forcing Professor Jackson to destroy it. Others claimed that it had been a good luck charm that had been overwhelmed by the Werewolves' tournament loss, resulting in its spontaneous destruction.

Regardless of the reason, as Team Bigfoot gathered at the base of Victory Hill, James saw that the imposing statue was, indeed, destroyed. Its rear half lay several feet away from its base, and while James couldn't be certain, it looked to him as if the pose of the remaining half was rather different than it had been when he'd seen it last.

"People are saying that the statue just exploded as soon as the Werewolves lost," Ralph said, crowding between James and Jazmine Jade. "Like it committed *statuicide* in shame or something."

"I don't blame it," Zane commented from James' other side.

Beside him, Warrington scoffed. "Who cares what happened to it? If it was me, I'd leave it there like a trophy even after Ares Mansion scampered off with its tail between its legs." James noticed that Warrington was still wearing the Bigfoot jersey he'd donned earlier in order to play reserve.

Behind the team, the crowd from Pepperpock Down was still milling around, congregating noisily in the quad between Administration Hall and Victory Hill, packing the lawns in excited anticipation. Team Werewolf was nowhere in sight and James assumed that they were simply waiting it out in their locker cellar, refusing to watch the moving of the houses. Viktor Krum, unfortunately, had left immediately after the match along with James' mum and sister. Word had leaked back to James that they had received an urgent message via the Shard, which Ginny had been carrying in her purse in the hope of news from her husband.

James' dad, of course, was out on his reconnaissance mission to New Amsterdam, accompanied by Titus Hardcastle, in preparation for tomorrow's raid. Viktor himself had wanted to go along, but Harry had been adamant in his refusal—taking more than two spies on the night's mission would have been conspicuous, he'd said, and he had no intention of alerting the new W.U.L.F. leader to the impending raid. James was quite glad that his father had insisted that Viktor stay behind for the night. If he hadn't, the game would have ended in forfeit before it was barely half over.

Now, in the wake of the Bigfoot victory, cheers still rang out from the gathering throng and pops of fireworks sounded in the hot evening air, flashing their colours up onto the Hill and the stern facade of Ares Mansion.

"So how's this going to happen?" Ralph asked, glancing around at the throng. "Does Franklyn or somebody need to come out and, like, levitate the houses or something?"

Gobbins shook his head. "I don't think so. I think the March of the Houses is old magic, set up by Pepperpock and Roberts and the rest back when they first built the Aleron. I think it happens all by itself. We just wait and watch."

Even as Gobbins spoke, a low, ominous groan arose. James felt the rumble of it in his chest and the soles of his feet. It throbbed in the air, blotting out the other noises rather like a base note on a gigantic magical amplifier. Immediately, the crowd hushed into bright-eyed silence. James looked toward Ares Mansion, but it simply sat there, unmoving, its windows unlit and blank like stubborn, staring eyes.

"Is this it?" James called, raising his voice over the thrumming rumble.

Zane shook his head, glancing around. "Must be! Look!" He pointed—not at Ares Mansion, but backwards, over the heads of the throng behind them. James and the rest of Team Bigfoot turned around and gasped.

Hovering over the crowd, casting its humongous blocky shadow onto the upturned faces was Apollo Mansion. It looked exactly the same as always except that you could see inside the dark footprint of its foundation: a square of heavy bricks, surrounding what was, unmistakably, the ceiling of the erstwhile basement game room. Clods of dirt and mortar pattered down over the crowd as the structure drifted overhead, moving like a giant parade balloon. A round white shape peered from one of the upper windows and James saw that it was Geoffrey Kleinschmidt, the Bigfoot reserve player who'd been too sick to make it to the match. He waved gamely, grinning, his hair poking up in an unruly strew.

"We won!?" he hollered down, both as a question and a statement, and the crowd roared back, laughing and cheering.

Slowly, ponderously, Apollo Mansion approached Victory Hill, passing over the crowd and emitting that deep, throbbing rumble. As it swept over James' head, he almost thought he could reach up and touch the rafters of the basement ceiling. He laughed out loud as he saw the disarmadillo hunkered on top of one of those rafters, crouched in a sort of alert ball, eyes blinking down at the crowd below.

As the house passed over the lawn of Victory Hill, casting its shadow over the broken werewolf statue, James was surprised to see that Ares Mansion was still there, sitting stubbornly on the Hill's foundation.

"Go on!" Zane called, grinning. "Beat it, house!"

"Yeah!" the members of Team Bigfoot joined in, raising their fists. Soon, the entire crowd rallied the cry, cheering and jeering raucously.

Ares Mansion did not budge, however, even as the shadow of Apollo Mansion crept up its front, casting its reflection onto the tall staring windows. Finally, gently, Apollo Mansion nudged the front corner of its counterpart. The sound of it was a soft, rattling *crunch*. In response, Ares Mansion shuddered slightly and seemed almost to let out a resigned sigh. A moment later, it arose from the foundation of Victory Hill, producing a long, crumbling, *ripping* noise.

The crowd erupted into cheers again as the houses traded places, moving like elephantine dancers. Slowly, almost sheepishly, Ares Mansion began its long march down Victory Hill and toward the empty foundation on the opposite end of the mall. In its place, Apollo Mansion settled slowly atop Victory Hill, its footprint meeting perfectly with the gaping foundation beneath it. The ground shook as the weight of the house settled and a puff of masonry dust arose all around it, pale in the moonlight.

The crowd redoubled its cheers, and the members of Team Bigfoot looked around at each other in amazement. Wentworth was there by then, his fingers wrapped in white bandages. Next to him, also wearing various bandages and braces, were Norrick, Mukthatch, Troy Covington, and the rest of the disabled players. Geoffrey Kleinschmidt burst through the front door in his pajamas, his hands raised as if the crowd was cheering solely for him. He made his way down the walkway and joined the team where they stood beaming at one another, happy for the moment beyond words.

"Go on in!" Ophelia Wright cried out, nudging James forward. "Check out your new digs! See what the view looks like from Victory Hill!"

"You too," Jazmine called, turning to the reserve players from the other houses. "All of you! Tonight, you're *all* Bigfoots!"

"Watch your mouth!" Warrington replied, frowning, but he didn't argue when the gathering pushed him up the footpath toward Apollo Mansion.

James thought that the building had been transformed, somehow. It looked exactly the same as it always had—just a big blocky mansion, perhaps a little too symmetrical and rather lacking in embellishment—but now, seated atop Victory Hill, the things that had once made it boring now made it regal. *It's the angle*, he thought, looking up at it as he approached, smiling with pride and triumph. *This is where it was originally built, I'd bet my skrim on it. This is how it was meant to be seen...*

This thought was interrupted, however, even as James put his foot on the first step of the main entrance. A very loud, very strange noise fell over the entire campus, shocking the crowd into silence. James glanced back, alarmed.

"What's tha—" Zane began, but was drowned out by the noise as it sounded again. It was a sort of metallic creak, long and ragged, followed by a rumble and a distant tinkle of breaking glass.

"Is that still the March of the Houses?" Ralph frowned, his eyes wide and nervous.

Next to him, Warrington shook his head. "No. That's coming from over there, just past Admin Hall."

"It's the Medical College," a voice cried from the crowd. "Something's wrong with it. Look out!"

The crowd began to move then in that alarming, sluggish way that only large groups of suddenly frightened people can move. They pushed and clambered, backing away from the corner nearest the beige bricks of the Medical College.

James looked, remembering what he had seen earlier, the small gathering in front of the Medical College's main entrance—Uncle Percy, Lucy, Izzy, and the group of Wizarding Court agents. The arbiter, Albert Keynes, had not been in sight, but he had to have been there somewhere.

"What have you done?" James asked under his breath, his eyes widening. He realized, with no real surprise, that the question wasn't addressed to Keynes.

As he watched, the lights of the beige building flickered, flashed, and then fell dark. Inside, monstrously, that awful noise sounded again, creaking and groaning rather like a beast in pain. And then, with no warning, most of the windows on the nearest side of the building exploded outwards.

Glass tinkled and flashed like confetti, spreading out and down into the nearby trees. Another noise followed—a sort of massive crumpling crash, and the face of the building *changed*. It sucked inward, distorting the shape of the structure as if it had been punched by a gigantic invisible fist. Bricks and broken masonry showered down into the bushes.

"It's imploding!" Zane announced, both frightened and amazed. "What could make it *do* that?"

Not a what, James thought, but didn't say, *a who*.

Debris rained down from the face of the Medical College, but the noise fell away. The event seemed to have spent itself. A moment later, James sensed movement at the far edge of the crowd, closest to the distorted building. The gathering was parting, spreading away from some moving nucleus. James stood on tiptoes, trying to see who or what it was. From his vantage point atop Victory Hill, he could finally see.

It was, of course, Petra.

She was walking away from the Medical College, her face pale and calm. Accompanying her, one on each side, were Izzy and Lucy. Both younger girls looked around at the parting throng, their eyes bright in the darkness.

James broke away from his friends and moved down the footpath of Victory Hill, meeting Petra as she emerged from the crowd. No one had tried to stop her or even to question her. Perfect silence hung over the scene as everyone watched, inexplicably breathless.

Petra met James' eyes. She looked tired and drawn but otherwise perfectly normal. She was holding Lucy's right hand and Izzy's left. Slowly, she glanced aside at the broken statue where it lay nearby, glinting in the moonlight.

"Congratulations, James," she said weakly, and offered him a small affectionate smile. "You won."



A ripple of commotion moved over the crowd as realization dawned on those closest to the front: this was Petra Morganstern, the one who had attacked the Hall of Archives and cursed Mr. Henredon, the one who had been escorted to the Medical College unconscious, in preparation for her imprisonment.

"But they gave her the poison apple!" someone whispered harshly. "How'd she wake up?"

"She's a criminal," another rasped. "She's dangerous!"

And another: "Look what she did to the Medical College!"

A low clamor arose from the crowd, spreading to a rabble. Then, louder voices called out in commanding tones. James looked up and didn't know whether to be relieved or dismayed to see Chancellor Franklyn approaching, shouldering through the throng. Professor Jackson and Mother Newt were close behind, their faces grim. Inexplicably, Albus seemed to be following along in Professor Jackson's wake, his eyes shining with the excitement of it all.

"Ms. Morganstern," Franklyn announced as he broke through the crowd. "What are you doing? Return to the Medical College at once! Where are your guards?"

"I'm sorry, Chancellor," Petra said, and James heard in her voice that she truly was. "I'm sorry for everything that's happened. But I won't be going back. Perhaps I will be able to repair everything. But not now. There are more pressing matters."

"There are no more pressing matters, miss," Jackson proclaimed grimly. James saw that the professor had his wand in his hand, at the ready. Albus peered avidly around Jackson's elbow as he went on. "You are a convicted criminal. You understand that we cannot allow you to leave this campus."

"And you understand, I think, that there is no way you can stop me," Petra replied, almost apologetically.

Jackson raised his wand. Franklyn saw this and raised his as well, his face strained. He opened his mouth to speak, but Mother Newt interrupted him.

"What is it you need to do, my dear?" she asked, moving ahead of the two men and smiling curiously at Petra.

Petra looked aside, at James. "We have a journey to make," she answered. "Not far and yet, I think, very far indeed. Are you still with me, James?"

James nodded. "But how do you know about that? I never got a chance to tell you...?"

"I know because you know," she said, and James understood: the silver thread. It ran both ways. She may not have understood the plan before her arrest, but she did now. James could see it in her eyes as she looked at him.

"And what, if I may be so bold," Mother Newt asked, still smiling faintly, "is the purpose of this journey?"

James answered this time. "To find out the truth, ma'am."

Franklyn shook his head firmly. "No. I cannot allow this. Professor Newton, you do not understand what it is they intend to do. They mean to open the Nexus Curtain. You see that Apollo Mansion once again stands atop Victory Hill. Given the proper key, they may succeed in passing through into another dimension. The young lady means to escape into a realm where none will be able to follow her!"

"That's not true," James called out, moving to get in front of Petra. "Petra doesn't need to escape because she's not guilty!" He stopped and then glanced back over his shoulder, his brow knitted. "Er... are you?"

Petra met his gaze but didn't respond. At least, not with words.

"Chancellor," Mother Newt said, "as a matter of fact, I am inclined to disagree with you. I do not believe that Ms. Morganstern means to escape. I believe that she is telling us the truth. About everything."

"All evidence to the contrary, Professor," Jackson said, his wand still raised and pointed at Petra, "how could you possibly know this?"

Mother Newt's smile broadened as she continued to stare at Petra. "Call it *woman's intuition*," she said with low emphasis. "Besides, I suspect that she is right about one more thing: I don't believe we can stop her even if we wished to. She is..." Mother Newt paused and narrowed her eyes, "... *unique*."

"Professor Newton," Franklyn said, shaking his head again, making his square spectacles flash in the moonlight, "we cannot simply allow this woman to leave. She is a convicted prisoner of the Wizarding Court of the United States."

"But she *isn't* leaving, not technically," Mother Newt replied lightly. "If you are right, Chancellor, then Ms. Morganstern will simply be entering Apollo Mansion. She can still be said to be confined to the campus. None would deny that fact. Thus, I believe, we can be honestly said to have performed our duties as well as could be expected under the circumstances."

"Madam," Jackson began, but Mother Newt stopped him with a quick backward glare.

"Put down your wand, Theodore," she said, her voice suddenly steely. "Don't be a fool. We are teachers. This is, as they say, well above our pay grade."

"She is a prisoner of the Wizarding Courts," Franklyn insisted urgently, lowering his own wand.

"And we are not arbiters," Mother Newt answered, sighing. "Let the young lady do what she means to do. She will return. Won't you, dear?" she asked, addressing this last to Petra.

"If I can," Petra answered. "And I will submit to whatever consequences there are when I do. I am hoping that things will look a bit different by then. To all of us."

Franklyn's face was red with tension. Jackson appeared to be balanced precariously between raising his wand again and submitting to Mother Newt's suggestion.

"Thank you, Professor," Petra said to the older woman across from her.

"Please," Newt said, smiling in a grandmotherly fashion, "call me Mother Newt."

Petra turned to James again and then glanced aside toward Ralph and Zane, who had also approached, their eyes wide and grave.

"I guess I'll go get the unicorn horseshoe," Zane suggested in a hushed voice. "It's still buried under the Warping Willow..."

"No need," Petra said. She let go of Lucy's hand and reached into a pocket on the front of her drab dress. James would have sworn that the pocket was too small to contain anything so large, but when Petra withdrew her hand, she was holding the silvery horseshoe. It glowed faintly and a low murmur of awe and fear thrummed through the crowd.

"Dear God," a voice said faintly. James glanced back and saw Chancellor Franklyn staring up at the horseshoe, his face draining of colour. *He's figured it all out, James thought. Just like that. He is one smart fellow...*

"I didn't expect we'd be doing this in front of the entire school," Ralph muttered, accepting the horseshoe as Petra handed it to him.

"It doesn't matter," Petra said, smiling wanly. She turned to Lucy and Izzy. "You both stay here. There's no need for you to come."

Izzy made no effort to let go of Petra's hand and James understood that Petra's suggestion was merely perfunctory. There was no way Izzy would consent to staying behind.

"I want to come," Lucy said, looking from Petra to James. "I want to see. I don't know anything about what's going to happen, but I'm in on it now, no matter what."

James expected Petra to forbid Lucy, but the older girl merely nodded. She looked back at Ralph, who still held the faintly glowing horseshoe.

"Let's do it," Zane announced stoically. "Let's get it over with."

Together, the three boys and three girls turned and walked up Victory Hill, approaching the corner of Apollo Mansion. The remainder of Team Bigfoot gathered silently around them, but at a careful distance. All of them could see the horseshoe shape engraved in the building's cornerstone, divided by the crack between the main house and the permanent foundation.

"What's this all about, James?" Jazmine asked quietly. James glanced back at her.

"It's... a long story," he answered after a moment. "But it's not a bad story. Petra is my friend. I have to try to help her."

"You'll tell us all about it when you get back, right?" Wentworth suggested, frowning slightly.

"Definitely," Ralph nodded, producing his large wand. Its lime-green tip glowed dimly in the moonlight.

"You want us to come too?" Gobbins asked. "Because we could, you know." The rest of the team, even the reserve players, murmured agreement.

"No," James replied, smiling, "but thanks."

"Whew," Norrick breathed. "Good luck, then. Wherever you're going, and whatever you're gonna do when you get there, good luck."

Mukthatch let out an encouraging woof.

Ralph turned around and held the horseshoe up, measuring it against the shape carved into the conjoined cornerstone.

"Petra," James asked quietly, turning to look at her, "what happened back there, in the Medical College? What happened to Keynes?"

Petra met his gaze thoughtfully. "He's still alive," she answered simply. James sensed her thoughts and sensed that this was the truth. It wasn't *all* of the truth, he knew, but for now, it was enough.

He moved a step closer to her so that no one else would hear. "Is it true, Petra?" he whispered. "Are you a... a sorceress?"

Her eyes hadn't left his. "Yes," she mouthed, and shrugged faintly. Tears stood in her eyes, shining dully. She tried to smile, but it faltered.

James nodded. For now, there was nothing more to say.

With a soft grating sound, Ralph pushed the unicorn horseshoe into the shape engraved in the cornerstone. There was no shocking noise or burst of magical light, and yet the crowd responded. A sigh of awe washed over the quadrangle. James looked up, as did the rest. A faint rose-coloured light glowed from every window of Apollo Mansion. It shifted softly, seeming to hint at every colour of the rainbow and even some colours that James had never imagined.

"I guess we go inside," Lucy suggested, her voice an octave higher than usual. "Is that it?"

James nodded. He reached out, took Lucy's hand in his right and Petra's in his left. Slowly, the group began to walk toward the main entrance of Apollo Mansion.

"Boys!" a voice called suddenly. James paused again with one foot on the first step. He looked back and saw Chancellor Franklyn peering up at him, his face lit with the soft, rosy light.

"If you see Ignatius Magnussen," Franklyn said earnestly, "tell him... tell him to stay away. Tell him not to come back. Will you do that?"

With those words, James thought he finally understood Franklyn's reasons for wanting to keep the Nexus Curtain closed for good. Magnussen, despite being Franklyn's friend, had been a monster. If he had escaped through the Nexus Curtain, then perhaps—hopefully—it had been a one-way trip. Perhaps the only way the murderer could ever return would be if the Curtain was opened again from this side. Franklyn had made it his life's mission to assure that that never happened.

"He won't be coming back, Chancellor," Ralph answered stolidly, raising his voice just enough to be heard. "Trust us."

Franklyn studied Ralph's face for a moment and then nodded slowly.

A moment later, Zane reached for the door handle atop the short stoop of Apollo Mansion. He gripped it, thumbed the latch, and pushed it open. The mysterious pulsing light covered every surface inside, shifting hypnotically.

"All of us together," Petra said, squeezing James' hand. "Everyone hold onto someone else. I think the moment we cross over the threshold, we'll go through. I think the whole house is the portal. Ready?"

James gulped. Ralph shuddered. Zane said, "You all go on ahead. I'm just gonna pop back to Hermes House for my camera. 'Kay?"

Ralph grabbed the blonde boy's hand and Zane gripped it, tittering nervously.

As one, the six stepped through the doorway into the faint rosy light, and vanished.



James' first step into the World Between the Worlds nearly tumbled him headlong over a rocky black cliff. Petra and Lucy were still holding his hands on either side and they pulled him back even as his foot dipped into empty space. He gasped as he drew his foot back and wobbled on the ledge. The six travelers peered carefully down into the misty distance.

They seemed to be standing on the lip of a shallow cave worn into a cliff of sharp black stone. A hundred feet below, monstrous waves slammed against the face of the cliff, sending up explosions of white water as if in slow motion. Beyond this, steely grey ocean stretched off toward the horizon, heaving beneath a low, white sky.

James shuddered. "I nearly fell into that," he commented, wide-eyed.

"This isn't the most convenient place to put a portal," Zane nodded. "Even if you survived the drop, who knows what kind of monsters swim around in an ocean like that?"

"None at all," Petra answered, her voice calm but emphatic. "There's nothing alive in that water. Nothing at all. You can sort of feel it, can't you?"

Lucy frowned. It was almost a grimace of disgust. "Yes," she answered. "It's like this isn't really a place at all. It's more like a kind of window dressing, something just to take up the space. There's no... no *taste* to it. No life or colour at all. It's like chewing on cardboard."

"Or like taking a peek behind the curtain of reality," Ralph agreed, his face tense. "Like it's here just because something *has* to be, but it's not meant to be seen by anyone."

"I think it makes sense," Izzy said, still holding Petra's hand.

Petra agreed. "It's not really a world after all," she mused. "It's just the World *Between* the Worlds."

"Look," Zane suddenly pointed, raising his arm toward the distant horizon. "It isn't *all* just water. There's something out there."

James followed Zane's pointing finger. Very faint and distant, a dark shape clung to the horizon.

"Is it a boat?" Lucy asked doubtfully.

Ralph shook his head. "It's an island, I think. But not like any island I've ever seen. It looks almost like a big giant footstool."

"It's a plateau," Petra said. "Just like this one, I think. Look over to the right. There's another one."

"There's more on this side," Zane added, peering around the boulders of the cave's left edge.

James leaned carefully out over the rocks of the cave's mouth, scanning the length of the watery horizon. The shapes were grey in the ocean mist, so far off as to be almost invisible, but once you began looking for them, more and more of them seemed to appear. They were eerily similar: rocky plateaus, oddly flat on top, rising like giants' stepping stones out of the monstrous ocean.

"What are they?" Izzy asked in a hushed voice.

"They're portals," Petra answered, and James did not doubt her. "Like this one. Each one leads to a different universe, or dimension, or reality. Some of them would be almost exactly like our own. Others would be so different, so alien, that we could barely look at them."

"They're awful," Lucy proclaimed with a shiver, hugging herself.

"No," Petra countered. "They're just themselves. They aren't good or bad. They just are."

Ralph asked, "Do you think this whole world is covered with them?"

Petra shook her head. "It isn't a world. It isn't round, and it doesn't have an end. But yes. I think all of it is like this. On and on, infinitely. If one had a boat, just think of the places they could go, the things they could see."

James shuddered again at the thought. The idea of taking a boat out onto that strangely disastrous, unnaturally flat ocean was horrible. Looking out over all that distance and those endless bland islands, James wanted nothing more than to crawl back into the shallow of the cave and huddle into a ball. He turned around and was both amazed and relieved to see a door standing in the shadows of the cave. It was framed with wood and James recognized it immediately as the front entrance of Apollo Mansion, seen from the inside. It hung open and through it, James could still see

the slope of Victory Hill, the broken werewolf statue, and the crowd congregated on the quad behind Administration Hall, milling uncertainly.

"I guess that's how we go back when we're ready," he said, gesturing toward the doorway. The others turned and looked, and there was a palpable sense of relief. The view of the dark quad and the familiar campus was very comforting after all that bright, blank vastness.

Lucy finally let go of James' hand. "So what do we do now?"

James glanced around nervously. "I guess we just look around," he ventured. "The whole reason we came here is because this is the one place that someone could hide something as powerful as the stolen thread from the Vault of Destinies. If we can find the thread, then perhaps we can find out who really broke into the Archive and prove Petra's innocence."

"Not to mention," Zane added suddenly, as if the idea had just occurred to him, "if we find the missing thread, maybe we can put it back into the Loom! Maybe that would set everything back to rights again! After all, our Loom was switched with one from another dimension, right? It got stuck here instead of reverting back to its own universe because whoever broke into the Vault stole the crimson thread from it! Remember what Professor Jackson said? He said that the switching of the Looms between our dimension and some foreign one changed everything, and maybe even broke the balance of the destinies! He made it sound like if the thread wasn't returned, eventually things would break down into complete chaos! Maybe if we put it back..."

"Then all of our destinies will snap back to the way they were before the break-in happened," James said, completing his friend's thought. "I wonder, is that really possible?"

"Perhaps Petra will never have been arrested?" Izzy suggested, a small ray of hope alighting on her brow.

"Maybe, if we replace the crimson thread," Zane replied thoughtfully, "then *none* of this will have happened."

The gathering was quiet for a moment as they all considered this. Finally, James nodded decisively.

"All right then," he announced. "Everyone take a look around. Let's see if we can find any evidence that someone from our world was here recently."

Ralph blinked. "Like, maybe, a candy wrapper or something?"

"Why," Zane asked, "do you see one?"

"No," Ralph shook his head, and then pointed. "But there are some stairs carved into the rocks by the ledge over there. Maybe somebody dropped something there...?"

James peered around the larger boy, looking toward the right corner of the cave's mouth. Just as Ralph had said, a series of worn, narrow steps curved around a boulder, leading out into the dull light.

Lucy asked, "Where do you think they go?"

Petra took a step toward the stairs. "Up," she said simply. She let go of James' hand, renewed her grip on Izzy's, and moved toward the nearly hidden stone staircase. The rest followed in silence.

The stairs did indeed go up. As James followed Petra and Izzy into the strangely flat light of the World Between the Worlds, he saw the stairs rising unevenly before them, carved into the crags of the cliff. The steps were worn smooth with age, and were wet with mist so that James gulped as he began to climb them. He felt the pull of the distance on his left side, heard the shuddering crash of the surf as it reached up, up, trying to drag them all down into it. To compensate, he leaned against the cliff face on his right, nearly hugging it as he climbed. Behind him, Lucy, Zane, and Ralph followed closely, shooting worried glances into the hungry depths.

Several minutes went by. The cliff was remarkably high and James felt that the steps had taken them some distance around the strange island. Finally, unexpectedly, the six travelers reached the top. Petra and Izzy moved a few paces out onto a flat plateau and the rest gathered around them, clustering unconsciously against the gaping white space all around.

James realized where they were even before he saw the black castle. He remembered the hissing shush of the yellow grass and the march of the clouds as the wind pushed them. He'd seen it all in Petra's dream-visions and had assumed it had only been a figment of her subconscious mind. Now, standing on the solid rock of this place, feeling the salty mist on his face and the feather of the wind as it combed through his hair like fingers, he felt the subtle shift of destinies. Here, everything was possible. The six of them were standing on the raw bedrock of reality, from which all dimensions sprang and grew. Here, every footstep had the potential to shake universes. And somehow, deep in the basement of Petra's mind, she had known. She had sensed they would end up here, and because she had known it, so had James. He just hadn't made the connection.

"I sure wasn't expecting that," Ralph breathed, staring with astonishment at the black castle. It stood on the distant ledge of the plateau, defying gravity, encrusted with turrets and conical roofs. Its windows were tall and narrow, glassless, black as doom.

"That's where we need to go," James said, not at all *wanting* to go there, but knowing it was their destination nonetheless. Beside him, Petra nodded.

"Someone's there," Lucy said in a low voice.

Zane peered up at the castle. "Looks empty to me," he commented, a little hopefully. "It almost looks... sort of... dead."

"Nice," Ralph moaned.

Petra spoke calmly. "If there is someone there, then they're expecting us. This is what we came for, isn't it? Let's go. But... keep your wands handy. You never know."

The group began to make their way across the gentle hump of the plateau, wading through the whispering yellow grass. With a sinking jolt, James remembered that he had dropped his own wand during the last seconds of the Clutchcudgel tournament and had completely forgotten to retrieve it afterward. He cursed himself silently, but reminded himself that he was walking alongside

one of the most powerful people in the magical world. If Petra proved unable to confront whatever was to come, then his wand surely would not be of any help anyway.

As the minutes passed, the castle grew gradually closer. It was rather small, at least compared to Hogwarts, but nearly fantastically tall, scraping its towers at the grey clouds. James noticed that just as in the dream-visions, the castle was perched on the ledge of the far cliff, jutting partly over it in complete defiance of gravity. Perhaps magic held it in place or perhaps it was simply balanced there by habit. Either way, it was very disconcerting to look at. James felt that the mere weight of his gaze might be enough to send the structure collapsing backwards into the waiting waves below.

"What's that?" Izzy asked suddenly, stopping and pointing. James turned and saw an object protruding from the grass some distance away, in the shadow of a low outcropping of boulders. Silently, the troop angled toward the object, cautious but curious.

James was the first to reach it. He peered at it, trying to make sense of the shape of it. It was quite large, but low and streamlined, comprised of wood and metal and draped with tangles of thin, silky rope. It lay tilted onto its side, nearly buried in the grass.

"It looks like a boat," Ralph suggested uncertainly. "But how could it have gotten up here?"

"It's not a boat," Zane called from some distance away. "Look at the hill next to it. See all that old fabric?"

James looked. Next to the boat-shape was a pool of wrinkled blue fabric, faded almost white. It clung to the rocky hill like a skin, poked through in a thousand places with tufts of grass.

"It was an airship," Lucy said, her voice filled with awe. "Someone came here by air. A long time ago, by the look of it. Maybe decades ago."

"Maybe even centuries," Petra added. "There's no way to know for sure. There're no bugs here. Nothing to rot the cloth or wood, nothing to corrode the metal. It looks almost like the day it landed except that the balloon is flat and destroyed by the grass that poked up through it."

"Travelers from one of the other island dimensions, you think?" James asked, approaching the wooden hull and peering in. The inside was nearly empty save for a few seats and a large rudder handle which protruded crookedly from the rear.

"One traveler, at least," Petra hazarded. "I wonder what dimension he came from? And if he made it into our own world?"

James noticed a series of symbols painted onto the hull of the ship, faded almost into obscurity. Among them was the unmistakable shape of a unicorn, white and stern, its horn a pale purple. Ralph and Zane joined James there and saw the same thing.

"The Rider," James said quietly. "The one from the tapestries in Erebus Castle! This was his ship. His and the unicorn that came with him."

"How can that be?" Ralph queried in a low voice. "When the Rider came through, he arrived somewhere back home, in Europe, in the Middle Ages, didn't he?"

James shook his head. "These portals aren't like normal doorways," he replied. "I don't think time or distance make much difference with them. The Nexus Curtain may always be there, connecting to our world, but it probably looks different every time it opens. It may open up into entirely different times and places in our world. There's no way of knowing."

Zane was barely listening. He was moving along the hull of the abandoned airship, studying the symbols painted onto it. "Look," he said, touching one of the drawings. "The unicorn that came through with the Rider wasn't just a regular beast. You can see that just by looking at the way it's painted. It was smart. It wasn't the *servant* of the Rider."

"They were partners," Ralph agreed, leaning to peer at the drawings. "They were explorers."

James shook his head darkly. "Too bad their explorations led them here."

They knew the dangers they faced, a thin, ghostly voice said in James' ear.

The three boys startled and spun around, their eyes bulging. Behind them, staring at them with sad curiosity was a wispy grey shape, almost invisible in the flat light of the plateau. It was the figure of a woman, young and moderately pretty, with huge eyes and a small, sad mouth.

Sorry, she said faintly. I didn't mean to frighten you.

"Are you a gh-gh—," Ralph stammered, his face going white. "A *ghost*?"

"Oh good grief, Ralph," Lucy said, approaching and shaking her head. "You had a ghost teacher for the last two years at Hogwarts."

"Yeah," Ralph admitted a little defensively. "Well, it's one thing to have a scheduled class with one. It's another thing to have one whisper in your ear when you're exploring some weird dead island."

Sorry, the ghost said again, drifting backwards. It's been so long since I've seen anyone. I forget what it's like to deal with the living.

"Who are you, miss?" Petra asked, tilting her head thoughtfully.

My name is Fredericka, the ghost answered, and made a dutiful curtsy with her transparent hands. *Fredericka Staples. I've been here ever since I...* She paused before finishing, as if she was embarrassed or reluctant to admit it. *Um, ever since I died.*

"Fredericka Staples," James said, his eyes widening. "You're the one who... the woman that Magnussen...! Er!"

The ghost nodded and pressed her lips together, obviously not wishing to discuss the topic.

"Who?" Lucy asked, but James shook his head.

"She died on the campus of Alma Aleron," he answered quietly. "She was a Muggle and she got mixed up with the wrong dark wizard. I'll tell you the rest later if you really want to know."

"I don't," Lucy said quickly. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Staples. I think."

"But I thought there weren't any ghosts at Alma Aleron," Ralph commented.

Zane shrugged. "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto."

Ralph rolled his eyes. "I don't know what that means."

Lucy said, "It means we aren't at Alma Aleron anymore, are we? The regular rules don't apply."

"Perhaps," Petra mused, as if to herself. "Perhaps this place is the *reason* there are no ghosts at Alma Aleron. Perhaps the portal into the World Between the Worlds is like a ghostly magnet, sucking them in or driving them away, or even both at the same time."

"But that can't be right," James said. "Nobody can get through the Nexus Curtain without the proper key."

"I think that's only true for the living," Izzy commented thoughtfully. "The dead can get through all *kinds* of doorways that were closed while they were alive."

The ghost of Fredericka Staples nodded. *When I died, there was a huge white light. I knew I was supposed to go to it, but I didn't want to. I wasn't ready to leave yet. I was engaged to be married, you see. My life had barely just begun and I didn't really know then that I had died. Not really. The light drew me to it, but I resisted it. And then, as I pushed back from the white light... something else began to pull at me. It was like the opposite of the white light... it was... a black hole, sort of. It was strong and I couldn't control it. It pulled me in, and then... suddenly... I was here. At first, I thought this was the afterlife, but not for very long. It wasn't either heaven or hell. It was just... here. And there were people here, sometimes.*

James blinked. "You've seen people here?"

Fredericka looked at him and then gestured toward the ancient airship. *More of the ships came once, a long time ago, she said in her thin, far-off voice. They looked just like that one, only bigger. They saw me and spoke to me. They'd traced the journey of the ones who came in that ship and asked me about them. I told them I was sorry, that I didn't know anything about their missing friends. Then they used their tools to learn the truth—that evil magical people had captured the man and the unicorn and killed them—and then they discovered that the same had happened to me. They learned more, though. They learned that not all of the people from our world are like the ones who committed those acts. There are good ones among us, always fighting the bad, but the balance of power is forever changing. They determined that our world was too dangerous for them to explore, and built the black castle as a warning. It's been there ever since, empty and silent. Until very recently.*

"You saw someone else," Petra said. It wasn't a question, but Fredericka nodded anyway, turning her attention to her.

I saw, but I didn't approach. I hid. I knew it was safer that way. Being a ghost has its benefits. Hardly anything can scare you anymore. But some things are worse than death. I hid and I watched.

Petra seemed to understand this. "They went to the castle, didn't they?"

Fredericka nodded, unwilling or unable to say any more.

"That's where we're going," James said, and swallowed past a lump of fear in his throat. "We should keep moving, before it gets dark."

It never gets dark here, Fredericka instructed blandly. *Nothing ever changes here at all. Not even time.*

"Come with us, Miss Staples," Lucy suggested. "Maybe we can help you get back to our own world."

Fredericka considered this with obvious longing and then shook her head. *I can't go into the castle*, she said. *I was afraid to go inside even before... she... arrived. Now I can't even bear to think of it.*

Petra said, "Do you know where the staircase is, Fredericka? The one that leads down to the cave portal?" When the ghost nodded, Petra smiled. "I think you'll be able to get back yourself if you really want to. As long as we are here, the portal is open and it'll take you back to our time and place. Perhaps you can get through and stay there if you try very hard."

Fredericka looked heartbreakingly hopeful. *Do you really think so?*

"I don't know," Petra answered, but James thought she did. "Either way, it's worth a try. Good luck, Fredericka."

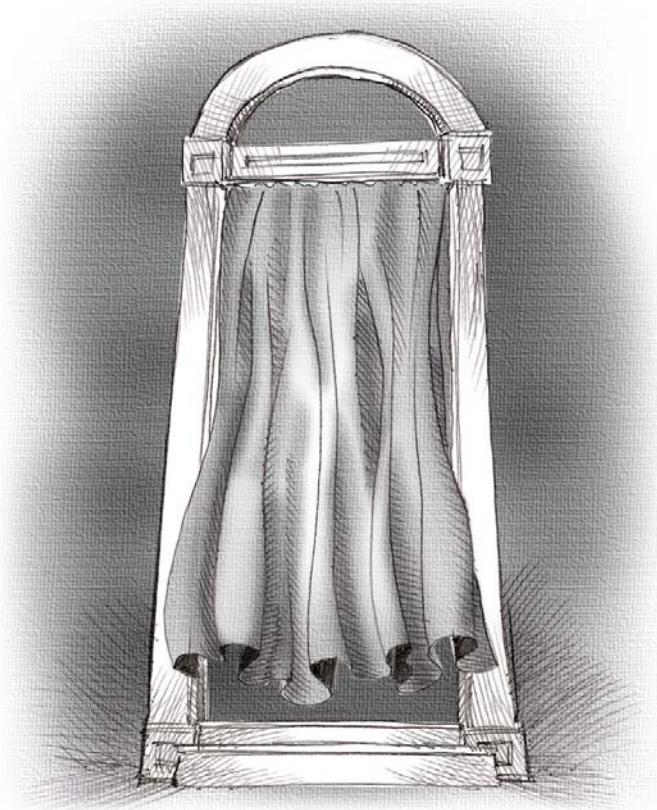
"Good luck," James added, and the others joined in.

Thank you, Fredericka said faintly. *I think I'm ready to go on now. Into the light, if I can, and whatever is beyond it. Maybe I'll see you all again on the other side.*

"Later rather than sooner," Ralph said quickly, and the ghost smiled her understanding. A moment later, she turned and seemed to fade from view as she drifted across the plateau.

The gathering watched the ghost of Fredericka Staples vanish and then stood in the constantly shushing grass for a long moment, silent and thoughtful. Finally, still wordlessly, James turned back toward the castle. It stood tall and ominous on the near horizon, casting virtually no shadow in the diffuse light of the World Between the Worlds. The others turned around as well and looked up at the stark shape, weighing their own secret thoughts and fears.

Slowly but surely, the six travelers resumed their journey.



24. THROUGH THE CURTAINS

As they neared the castle, the silence seemed to develop its own strange inertia. At first, James merely felt that there was nothing to say. And then, as the minutes passed, he began to feel as if spoken words would somehow spoil the moment—not because the moment was beautiful, of course, for it certainly was not, but because there was a brittleness in the air, a tension that spun out like spider's silk, that James was loath to break. As the gathering finally approached the cliff's edge upon which the black castle stood, James finally realized the truth of why everyone had grown so quiet: they were all afraid that there really *was* someone inside the castle, someone powerful and terrifying, who might hear even the softest whisper and come out to greet them.

When they stood before the massive open gates of the castle, however, speech became necessary.

James rasped, "Do we just go in? Should we... knock, like?"

"We just go in," Petra replied, her own voice hushed. "But keep a sharp eye out."

"Someone's watching," Lucy nearly moaned, peering up at the overhanging balconies.

Petra nodded. "I know. They're waiting for us."

James stepped alongside her as they moved into the shadow of the entryway. "Do you know who it is?"

Petra shook her head and pressed her lips together.

The inside of the castle was almost entirely empty. One enormous room yawned before the travelers, leaping up into shadowy vaults and stretching off toward pillared archways on the far side. The group's footsteps echoed loudly in the darkness, making stealth impossible. The stone floor was covered with decades of blown grit and drifts of dead grass. As the troop crept into the center of the space, moving in a nervous huddle, James caught a hint of movement on the far wall. He peered into the darkness, squinting without his glasses, and made out a large framed shape. It was much larger than a man and filled with shifting shadows: a gently billowing curtain.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Zane muttered, looking in the same direction as James.

Ralph nodded. "There are more of them. All around the room. I see at least a dozen."

"They're escape routes," Petra said in a low voice. "Placed here by those who built the castle for those unfortunate adventurers who might end up marooned here. Each curtain will take the stranded traveler back to the dimension from which they came, although the where and when might be a bit tetchy."

Nervously, Lucy asked, "How do you know these things, Petra?"

Petra shrugged. "I don't know."

"So they're all like mini Nexus Curtains," James said, looking around wonderingly at the gently billowing portals.

Ralph seemed heartened by this news. "So *all* of these will take us back to our own world?"

"I'd beware of them," Petra warned. "They're under the influence of she who has taken this castle. They will do what they were made for, but not without her capricious tricks. You may find yourself in the bottom of the Dead Sea, or a hundred feet over a live volcano. Beware of these portals unless there is no other hope."

"Good advice indeed," a woman's voice said brightly. The sound of it echoed all around, rendering it huge and directionless. James startled, as did the rest of the group. All eyes scanned the dark space, seeking the speaker, but no one was evident.

"Who are you?" Petra called out. "And why have you attacked our world?"

"That's not the question you *really* want answered," the voice replied, still echoing broadly around the cavernous room. "Here, time may not mean much, but I assure you, in the world from which you come, it is still marching along as always, and there are things we must attend to, you and I. Let us not waste precious minutes on trivialities."

James raised his voice and ventured, "Where's the crimson thread?"

"A better question," the woman's voice answered, smiling, and a thin beam of light came into view, cutting through the heights of the room and alighting on a previously unnoticed scene. James

turned toward it and was surprised at what he saw. A collection of utterly prosaic furniture was laid out in the unmistakable arrangement of a bedroom. There was a narrow bed and side table, a chest, a desk, and a high-backed chair, turned so that it faced away from the travelers.

Petra's hand squeezed James' suddenly, nearly hard enough to hurt.

"The thread is there," the woman's voice echoed in answer.

James squinted toward the light. A small silver jewelry box sat open upon the desk. Visible just inside it was an opal brooch. Spooled around this, glinting in the light, was a length of metallic red thread.

Zane gasped. "The missing thread!"

Petra moaned, "My father's brooch!"

James broke away from the group. Steeling himself, he approached the desk, which stood nearest of all the furnishings. When he reached for the brooch, however, his hand froze. He felt the veins of his fingers go brittle a moment before the flesh crackled white all the way up to his wrist. Tendrils of icy vapor trailed behind as he yanked his hand away and hugged it to his chest, crying out in shock and fear.

"That was unwise," the woman's voice said, smugly amused. "But instructive, I am quite sure. Only she who owns the brooch may approach it."

"Why are you doing this?" Petra demanded, striding toward James and taking his hand into both of her own. After a moment, James cried out again as the feeling returned to it. He flexed his fingers experimentally and then glanced thankfully at Petra.

"I am not doing any of it," the woman answered, and James finally thought he saw her. A figure stood disguised in the shadows beyond the beam of light. Even in the darkness, he recognized the shape of her—the hooded robe, framing that beautiful, arrogant face. It was the woman he had first met in the halls of the Aquapolis back at the beginning of their journey. It was Judith, the Lady of the Lake.

"You are right, James," the woman said, as if reading his thoughts. She stepped forward slightly so that the light reflected up onto her features. "But only a little. I have taken the form of the woman that Merlinus once loved, but I have also adopted a trace of the woman your sorceress friend bargained for. If she looks at me closely, she will see it."

Petra peered past the beam of light toward the woman on the other side. Her face paled. "Mother?" she whispered.

"I am both and I am neither," the woman answered lightly, waving a hand. "I have borrowed from the shape of Merlin's Judith and your own mother, my dear, partly because it amuses me and partly because it was the condition of the bargain."

"The bargain," Petra said, still whispering. "But... I didn't kill Izzy. The dreams I had at the beginning of our journey were wrong. Izzy *didn't* die in the lake on that night. I called it off. The bargain was never completed."

"You didn't kill Izabella," the woman corrected, "but you *did* kill. You sent your stepmother into the lake in your sister's place. By doing so, you only changed the *conditions*. The bargain itself was fulfilled. Your destiny insisted upon it. Thus, rather than recalling your beloved mother from the afterlife, you got... me. *I* arose from the lake on the night that you murdered your stepmother. You recalled me from the mists of the netherworld, my dear, in the place of your mother. I wish I could say that I was sorry, but alas, I am not."

"Who are you?" Petra asked again.

"This is still not the question that begs to be asked," the woman replied impatiently, "but if you must know, I am a Fate. There are three of us, although not in the way that you might think. The other two Fates do not know their own identities, and for now that suits me just fine. My true name would be unpronounceable to you, so you may simply call me Judith or the Lady of the Lake. I enjoy both titles."

"Why are you doing this?" This time, it was Lucy who approached. She stood next to James.

"Why?" the woman said, raising her eyebrows in a surprised smile. "Because it is *my* destiny. And because I enjoy it. Need there be any other reason?" She laughed. "The truth is, I have been working toward this end for nearly a year by your time—almost since the moment I arose from the lake's surface. It took me some time to find all of you, but once I did, I knew that you would lead me to where I needed to be. I even assisted when it was absolutely necessary. And sure enough, you led me to Alma Aleron and that delightful device known as the Vault of Destinies. The rest was eerily easy."

James felt Zane and Ralph join him now. The group was once again complete.

Petra's voice turned cold as she said, "What is it you want?"

"Still the wrong question," Judith scolded, her smile turning brittle. "Soon I will grow impatient with you. Stop wasting our precious time. We have work to do."

Zane spoke up then, his voice trembling slightly. "Give us back the crimson thread!"

"That is a demand, not a question." Judith sneered slightly, turning her pretty face piggish for a moment. "And I cannot grant your demand at any rate."

Petra made to reach for the brooch, around which was twined the tantalizing thread, but Judith chided her warningly.

"I would not be so bold, dear one," she teased. "The brooch can only be taken by she who owns it."

"But *I* own it!" Petra exclaimed. It was nearly a plea.

James took one more step forward, placing himself at the head of the group, his hand still intertwined with Petra's. "Will you," he asked, framing the question with great emphasis, "give us back the crimson thread?"

"*That's* the question I've been waiting for!" Judith cried out, clapping her hands with glee. "And I have an answer for you, James Sirius Potter, you wonderful, bold young man. The answer is no."

"Why not?" James demanded, barely stopping himself from reaching for the thread-twined brooch again.

"Because *that* is *not* the crimson thread!" Judith exclaimed, delightedly. "And because the *real* crimson thread does not *wish* to go back!"

As Judith spoke, James perceived movement inside the beam of the light. He turned toward it and saw that there was someone else in the castle with them, someone who'd been there the entire time, seated on the high-backed chair, turned away from them. A pale hand moved on the arm of the chair, gripping it as the figure stood, arose to her full height, and turned around.

"You wonderful fools," Judith breathed triumphantly, gazing at the young woman who now stood in the beam of light. "You failed to understand the true meaning of the Loom. That length of thread you see wrapped around the brooch is only a symbol. *She* is the *true* Crimson Thread, drawn through the Vault of Destinies from her own dimension, just as the symbolic thread itself was plucked from the Loom. As long as the symbolic thread stays here with us, *so... does... SHE*."

James was speechless. He stared into the beam of light, unable to take his eyes from the young woman standing there, smiling weakly. Her hair was long and dark, framing a face he knew very well except for the eyes. There, he saw only a hollow deadness, lurking just under a pall of misery. Except for the eyes, the young woman standing inside the light, at home in that odd bedroom assembly, was Petra herself.

"Izzy," the other Petra said, her voice cracking into tears. "I'm so sorry I killed you."

"It was *you* I dreamed of," Petra said, staring at her sudden twin. "Not me. In *your* world, you were too late. You killed her."

The other Petra nodded slowly, not taking her eyes from the Izzy that stood just outside the light.

"So that's *your* brooch," James said, nodding toward the jewelry box. "You never went on the ocean journey with us, so you never lost it."

"This is not the Petra you know, James," Judith replied, finally moving into the light. "In her world, she never came to your home seeking refuge. Instead, she gave herself over to the destiny that claimed her on the night she killed her sister. She has abandoned good and forsaken love. She has nothing left, which is why she was so willing to join me. And after all, why wouldn't she? I am her mother. She paid for me. She paid very dearly."

The other Petra responded to this by leaning her cheek onto Judith's shoulder.

"Petra," James called out sharply, speaking to the young woman in the light. "That isn't really your mother! Haven't you been listening? She's some evil beast from the netherworld, bent on creating chaos! Petra, she's not even really human!"

"Don't call me that name anymore, James," the young woman in the light said sadly. "Petra is no more. Now there's just me, Morgan."

Judith nodded slowly and smiled. "My 'daughter' and I have been very busy ever since I drew her into your world. You see, the rules of the Nexus Curtain do not apply to either of us. She is not of your dimension and I am not human. We may pass through as we wish, although doing so does have its consequences. Dimensions don't respond well to two of one person occupying them at the same time. Whenever my Morgan passed into your world, your Petra fell asleep. In truth, I suspect she even faded from your world, and slept here, on this very bed, trading places with Morgan. I suppose they *could* exist at the same time in the same world—for a time, at least—but it would not be without its own strange consequences. The fabric of existence would reject such a duality, and would strive to annihilate one of the dimensional twins, all in the name of balance. But this is neither here nor there. The fact is, we have passed through into your reality, on several, important occasions. We have, in fact, had quite the busy little lives in your world."

James suddenly thought he understood. He narrowed his eyes angrily. "You!" he exclaimed, pointing. "You killed the leader of the W.U.L.F. and took over! You're their new leader!"

"Oh my, no," Judith laughed again, delightedly. "No, no, no, you silly boy. *I'm* not the leader of the W.U.L.F." She gestured affectionately toward Morgan. "She is. She killed Edgar Tarrantus. Frankly, she was doing the man a favor. He'd grown so very *political* in his old age that he was very nearly a joke. More importantly, she killed the Muggle politician. They'd had other plans for him, of course, but Morgan here can be quite persuasive. In death, Senator Filmore will serve a much greater purpose. And besides, American politicians are, as they say, a dime a dozen." She laughed as if she'd made a small joke at a party.

"Why couldn't you just stay in your own dimension?" Lucy called out suddenly to Morgan, her face pale but stern. "I'm sorry that you bollixed it all up and killed your own version of Izzy, but why do you want to go spreading your misery around to somebody else's dimension?"

"Why, that's simple," Morgan said, raising her cheek from Judith's shoulder. She shook her head, as if amazed that the answer wasn't completely obvious. "Because in your world, Izzy is still alive. Mother told me so. Here, I can get her *back*."

And then, with horrible suddenness, Morgan made a beckoning motion with her right hand. Izzy jerked away from Petra and flew into the light. Morgan caught her and instantly drew a hand down over the younger girl's face, putting her into a deep sleep. Izzy slumped.

"I'm sorry, Iz," Morgan said, nearly sobbing with relief. "I won't ever let you go this time. This time, I'll keep you safe."

Petra was rushing forward into the light, but she was completely unprepared for the bolt that struck her, emanating from Morgan's outstretched hand. Petra flew backwards, bowling into James, Zane, and Ralph, who toppled behind her.

"Stop this!" Lucy cried, running forward with her wand in her hand, pointing wildly ahead of her. She had nearly made it to Izzy, was reaching for the younger girl's limp hand, when Judith acted.

James saw it, but was helpless to stop it. He opened his mouth to cry out, but it happened even before he'd drawn the breath to scream.

"Die, little one," Judith laughed, and flicked a finger at Lucy, as if she was merely a fly. A bolt of green exploded against Lucy's side. Her head jolted sideways as her body flew into the air, turning almost gracefully. Lucy flew out of the light, dead in midair. Her wand fell from her hand and clattered to the rug, making no noise. There was a rolling thump as the girl herself dropped onto the shadowy stone floor fifteen feet away.

There was a pause of completely shocked horror. For one long, terrible moment, James refused to believe what he had just seen. Then, with perfect finality, the reality of it fell upon him and he cried out, using the very breath that he had drawn to warn his now dead cousin.

"NOOO!" he shrieked, screaming the word so long and loud that sweat sprang out on his brow and his vision doubled. He saw Judith laughing at his horror, saw Morgan clutch Izzy even closer to her, ignoring the dead girl on the floor nearby. Zane and Ralph were clambering to their feet, moving as if in a daze. Between them, Petra seemed too stunned to speak. Her eyes were so round, her expression so utterly transfixated with shock and rage, that she looked as if she couldn't even move.

And then, as Morgan and Judith carried Izzy toward one of the waiting curtains, Petra *did* move. She pushed her way through the makeshift bedroom, shoving furniture aside almost without touching it, chasing after the departing women.

"Wait!" James cried out desperately, grabbing at Petra's arm. "What about Lucy? We can't just leave her here!"

Petra seemed not to hear. Across the vast room, Morgan and Judith passed through one of the billowing portal curtains and vanished. Petra began to run. Her dress streamed out behind her and coldness beat from her in waves.

"*Petra!*" James shouted, turning his plea into a hoarse demand. "*We can't just leave Lucy!*"

He caught up to Petra, clutching her arm so hard that she finally stopped and spun around. When she turned her gaze upon James, he stumbled backwards. Her eyes were horrible—flashing like diamonds in a winter sun, yet dark as tombs. She blinked and seemed to recognize him, although her expression didn't soften.

"I'm sorry, James," she said. "There's nothing I can do for Lucy. She's dead. But Izzy is still alive and she needs me. I can't stay here."

James buried his face in his hands, overcome with helpless misery. He glanced back and saw Zane and Ralph kneeling over Lucy's body, lifting her hands as if to help her up. They didn't understand yet, or were simply refusing to believe it.

"*But she killed Lucy!*" James exclaimed, crying out with such affronted wretchedness that his voice splintered.

"Then they should pay for it," Petra said, and her voice rang in the high chamber of the room, building on its echoes until it sounded like a chorus. James looked back again and saw Zane

and Ralph crossing the floor to join them. Lucy's body hung limp in Ralph's arms and Ralph, James saw with real surprise, was crying. Tears streamed down the big boy's face, making shining tracks on his cheeks.

"We did everything we could, James," he said pleadingly. "But we ran out of ideas! Even my wand won't do anything! And I tried! I really did!"

James found himself nodding at his friend. "I know, Ralph," he said, and tears filled his own eyes, tears of mingled misery and rage. "I believe you."

"Let's go get those two witches," Zane seethed in a low, fierce voice. His face had gone as pale as a gravestone.

"Neither of them are witches," Petra said, turning back to the wafting fabric of the portal curtain. "But that won't help them when I find them."

With a shuddering breath, James moved alongside Petra and gripped her hand once more. It was so cold that it almost stung. Together, with Ralph in the rear, still carrying Lucy's body, the four strode toward the curtain and vanished into its sweeping folds.



When the curtain swept back from them, James blinked into darkness. Noises rang out all around—scufflings and shouts, the whoosh and crackle of spells, all forming the unmistakable clamor of a magical fight. A streak of green lit the space and James saw a man nearby, dueling a wildly grinning witch.

"Where are we?" Ralph called, his voice frightened.

"The Department of Mysteries," Petra replied grimly, striding forward. "But not in our time. Don't touch anything. Don't even raise your wands. This is not our destination. It's only a trick."

James matched Petra's stride, but couldn't avoid looking around. What he saw sent a chill deep into his heart. The dueling man was his father's godfather and one of James' namesakes: Sirius Black. His black hair clung to his face in sweaty tangles as he manipulated his wand.

"Give it up, Bellatrix," Sirius grunted, jabbing forth with a Disarming Spell. "You've always been far better with your tongue than your wand."

The wild-eyed woman cackled eagerly, deflecting the spell and parrying with another green curse.

"We are not real to them," Petra called out, walking directly between Sirius and Bellatrix as they battled. "Unless we stop and take possession of this reality, it will not recognize us. Don't interfere! There is another curtain straight ahead. *That* is where the Lady of the Lake and Morgan have gone. We must keep on."

James looked and saw what Petra meant. Straight ahead of them, no more than fifteen paces away, was another Nexus Curtain, identical to the one through which they had already passed. Petra strode toward it purposefully and James matched her stride for stride.

"James!" Zane exclaimed, grabbing at his friend's shoulder and pointing. "Look over there! Is that...?"

James knew the story of where they were. He knew what the battle was about and what was about to happen. Sirius Black was going to be killed, sent through the veil that wafted even now behind him—the veil through which, ironically, James and his companions had just come. And yet, as he looked toward where Zane was pointing, James was stunned almost to a standstill.

His father moved at the perimeter of the battle, engaged in his own struggle. His glasses were crooked on his face; the famous scar marked his forehead. He appeared to be almost exactly the same age as James himself.

"We could stop it," he said, reaching out to grasp Petra's arm. "We could stay here and stop it all. We could save Sirius and stop all the terrible things that happened afterward!"

"James," Petra said, pausing only for a moment, "you've been here before. It's the bargain of the Gatekeeper all over again. We can't change what's been done, no matter how much we might want to. History will find a way to happen, no matter what. Our destiny is elsewhere. Come."

Reluctantly, James agreed. The troop moved through the battle, unscathed and unseen, and stepped into the soft folds of the second portal. As he went, however, James couldn't help looking back. Sirius was taunting Bellatrix for her failure to strike him and she was raising her wand, her teeth bared in fury and black glee. And then, thankfully, the fabric of the curtain swooped around James and he felt that reality drop away behind him.

This time, when the curtain passed over the travelers, they moved into the noise and heat of an even larger battle. James recognized their surroundings immediately: it was Hogwarts, although not quite as he knew it. Witches and wizards crowded the hall, engaged in outright war. In the near distance, James saw Bellatrix Lestrange again, only this time she was dueling his own grandmother, Molly Weasley, her face nearly unrecognizable with grim ferocity. More faces became visible in the fracas: his long dead Uncle Fred, whom he knew only from pictures; Ted Lupin's mother, Tonks; even a much younger version of Oliver Wood, fiercely battling alongside Horace Slughorn. The floor vibrated beneath James' feet and enormous legs moved beyond the windows—a giant was just outside, its club rising to deliver a blow to the decimated castle. A snarling shape leaped over the crowd in a blur, landing directly beside James and flashing its bloody teeth. With a jolt of terror, James realized that it was the infamous Fenrir Greyback, the werewolf.

"None of it can harm us," Petra called out, approaching a third wafting curtain. "So long as you do not engage in what you see. Try not to look." James heard the reluctance in Petra's own voice, however. If not for Izzy's kidnapping, she herself might have stopped and joined the battle, regardless of the consequences.

The travelers stepped into the third curtain.

Screaming met them this time. It was a woman's voice and James saw her almost instantly. She stood before a wooden crib, clutching a baby to her chest, shielding the tiny shape with her hands and arms. At her feet lay a dark-haired man. He stared unseeingly up at the ceiling of the small room, dead, and James recognized himself in the man's features—it was his grandfather, of course, James Potter the First. A high, cold voice overwhelmed the woman's screams and James found himself walking directly in front of the figure of Tom Riddle, still young and bursting with malevolent strength.

"Make it easy on yourself, Lily," the Dark Lord instructed, raising his wand. "In a moment, there will be nothing left for you to live for anyway."

"Go!" James screamed out, pushing Petra toward the next curtain, which wafted in the doorway of the room's small closet. "Either stop him from killing her or go! Go! I don't want to see it!"

Lily Potter continued to scream and James fled through the curtain, tears of helplessness and rage blurring his vision. A flash of blinding green light followed him, briefly but memorably.

And then they were in a small dingy kitchen. A woman was seated at a rickety table across from a man James recognized: Lucius Malfoy, although much younger than James had last seen him. He was drawing a cloth-wrapped object from his robes, placing it onto the table next to his empty teacup.

"Unwrap it, Mrs. Agnelli," he said quietly. "It is for you."

She did, and it was a singularly ugly dagger, its blade tarnished nearly black, as if it had been rubbed with soot.

"No!" Petra moaned this time, pausing. "No, Mum! Don't do it! He's lying!"

James touched her shoulder, drawing her back. "It won't change anything," he urged softly, hating himself for doing so. "You were right before. It's all a trick. We have to save Izzy."

Petra nodded, but didn't take her eyes away from the woman at the table. James saw the resemblance between the two.

"It'll hurt only for a moment," Lucius said soothingly.

"Go on," Zane said, nudging Petra gently. "One more curtain. There's nothing we can do here and you don't want to watch."

Petra nodded again, but still she did not move. Finally, she shook herself. She glanced at Zane, Ralph, and James, even at the sad bundle of Lucy's body in Ralph's arms, and then sighed deeply. She turned, saw the billowing curtain in the corner of the kitchen, and walked toward it.

Somehow, James knew that it was the last of the portals. They had passed through the Gauntlet. For better or worse, whatever was about to come, there would be no turning back.

When the final Nexus Curtain unfolded around them, the travelers were once again met with the noise of a crowd.

James blinked, his eyes dazzled with flashing lights and monstrous hulking structures. People pressed in on him from all sides, thronging and jostling. It took several seconds for James to realize where and when he was.

"New Amsterdam!" Zane called out, raising his voice over the noise. "Why are we here?"

"Is it the present day?" Ralph asked. "*Our* present day?"

Next to James, Petra swayed on her feet for a moment, as if disoriented. She clutched James' shoulder, and he covered her hand with his.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded uncertainly, and then seemed to recover herself.

"We are back to our own day and time," she said with grave confidence. "Morgan is here. We are both here together." Suddenly, she turned and led the group through the throng, angling toward bright lights ahead.

Ralph looked up at the looming skyscrapers and the rain of parade confetti. "But why are we here, in New Amsterdam?"

Petra stopped at the perimeter of the crowd, where the view opened onto a section of the closed-off city street. "Because this is where *she* wants us to be."

James jostled to get next to Petra and saw.

They stood on the edge of the Memorial Day parade route, which cut straight through the main thoroughfare of the great city. Flat wagons lined the avenue, covered in festive decorations and oversized tableaux, most decorated in red, white, and blue colours. The floats were stopped now, halted by a police helicopter which sat incongruously in the center of a wide intersection, its rotors revolving slowly. The parade crowd watched with avid interest as policemen in riot gear moved in an urgent circle, their weapons raised, surrounding two men. The men stood in the center of the street, flooded with spotlights, their arms held over their heads. James recognized both of them. One was Titus Hardcastle. The other was his father, Harry Potter.

"That's them!" a woman's voice called out, heard by the entire crowd. James glanced wildly toward the sound and saw Judith herself, pointing, her chin raised and her eyes bright. "*They* killed Senator Filmore! I saw it myself in that basement hideout right behind you! His body is there even now, next to their names, written in his own blood! Look! They're terrorists and murderers! Arrest them!"

Nearby, Morgan stood at the edge of the crowd, still cradling Izzy against her shoulder, as if the girl had fallen asleep while waiting for the parade.

The police approached Titus and Harry cautiously, hunkered low, their weapons raised. Near the helicopter, two men in black suits spoke urgently into a handheld radio and James recognized them as the men from the Magical Integration Bureau, Price and Esposito. Harry and Titus did not attempt to flee their captors or use spells to escape. There were far too many Muggle observers. Television cameras surrounded the parade route, installed on tall gantries, even now broadcasting the event live to the entire country. James marveled hatefully at the perfection of Judith's plan.

"She means to have your dad arrested, James!" Zane cried, pushing James out into the street. "Stop them!"

"I can't!" James shouted back. "The whole Muggle world is watching on TV! The giant Disillusionment Spell that hides New Amsterdam from the Muggles won't work on magic we perform right in front of them! It'd break the Law of Secrecy! Why do you think Dad and Titus are just going along with them?!"

"Look!" Ralph shouted suddenly, pointing into the air over the street.

James looked and felt as if the entire world had dropped out from beneath him. One hundred feet over the New York intersection, floating like a cloud of bats and hidden from the Muggle observers below, were dozens of broom-borne wizards in black robes. It was the W.U.L.F., waiting for their moment to strike. They could be stealthy, James knew. They simply had to wait for the helicopter to rise into the air, bearing their enemy, Harry Potter, and they could strike it down easily, perhaps freezing its rotors or cursing the pilot dead in his seat. To the observers below, inured by the city's massive, constantly refreshed Disillusionment Charm, the crash would appear as a freak accident.

Judith knew that Harry Potter and his Aurors were her greatest enemy in her pursuit of chaos. She didn't just mean to see him arrested. She meant to see him dead.

"We can't let it happen!" Zane insisted, staring up at the swirling dark wizards.

"But we can't use magic!" James insisted. "The Vow won't let us! We couldn't do it even if we wanted to!"

"Some of us can," Petra said, her voice as flat and cold as iron. With that, she stepped out into the street and raised her right hand, her fingers splayed. A crackle of light exploded from it, but Petra did not aim it at the helicopter. Instead, she flung it out over the avenue toward the young woman who held her sleeping sister.

This time, it was Morgan who was unprepared for the attack. Petra's bolt struck her in the shoulder and threw her backwards into a lamppost, which bent ominously at the force of the blast. Izzy flailed from Morgan's arms, but did not fall. Instead, she floated in the air, levitated by Petra herself as she strode out into the street.

"Wake up, Iz," Petra said, lowering her sister gently to the ground. "Come back to me, love."

Izzy blinked as her feet touched the pavement, and the crowd backed away all around her, frightened by the blast and the sight of the magically floating girl.

"Petra! The helicopter!" Ralph called out, hoisting Lucy's body in his arms. The crowd was becoming agitated, progressing toward raw panic.

"Drop your weapons!" an amplified voice roared out. James spun toward it and saw a policeman in riot gear pointing an electric bullhorn at his father, who held his wand in his upraised hand. Behind the policeman was the Magical Integration Bureau agent named Price. He was pointing at Harry Potter's wand, instructing the officer to take it from him.

"Ms. Morganstern," a man's voice declared suddenly, coming from directly next to James. He glanced up and was shocked to see Merlinus Ambrosius. The big man stood at the edge of the crowd, his eyes locked onto Petra as Izzy rejoined her in the middle of the street.

"Headmaster," Petra said, taking Izzy's hand in her own. Strangely, she didn't seem terribly surprised to see him there.

"I know what you are thinking, Ms. Morganstern," Merlin said. "And I understand. I have been following your progress—all of you—very closely. I applaud your ingenuity and spirit, but this must end here."

"You big sneak!" Zane suddenly exclaimed, glaring up at Merlin. "You kept the third Shard of the Amsera Certh, didn't you? You've been using it to listen in on all of us!"

Merlin ignored him. To Petra, he called, "Come back, my dear. Join us. We cannot stop what is about to happen, but we do not have to watch it. We have all seen enough terrible things."

"But we *have* to stop it!" James exclaimed, boggling up at Merlin. "They mean to kill my dad! You're *Merlin*! Stop the engine of the helicopter with your magic! Freeze it to the ground or something!"

"The woman who calls herself Judith has foreseen every possibility," Merlin answered, gravely apologetic. "Their combined magic is like a shield around the helicopter, preventing even myself from interfering with it. It *will* take off and it will have your father inside it, along with Mr. Hardcastle. What happens after that, I'm afraid, is beyond our control. I am sorry, James."

In the intersection, the whine of the helicopter began to cycle up. The rotors spun faster as Harry Potter and Titus Hardcastle were led to it, surrounded now by the police in their armored riot gear. Grit and confetti began to spiral up from the intersection under the force of the helicopter's backwash.

Petra did not move to join Merlin at the edge of the crowd.

"Ralph!" James cried suddenly, turning and grasping the bigger boy's shoulder. "Give me your wand!"

James expected Ralph to waste several seconds asking for an explanation, but to his credit, he simply hugged Lucy's body to him with one arm and dipped into his back pocket with the other. Wordlessly, he handed his oversized wand to James. It wasn't the first time that circumstances had required such an exchange.

James gripped Ralph's wand and leapt into the street. He pointed the lime-green tip toward the police helicopter even as the doors shuttled closed on its side, enclosing Titus Hardcastle and his father.

"*Protego!*" he shouted, putting as much force into the command as possible. Rather than the bolt of bluish light he had expected, enveloping the helicopter with a spell of protection, Ralph's wand merely emitted a muted flicker, hardly brighter than a Muggle camera flash. James stared at it furiously, and then leveled it again at the helicopter.

"*Congelo!*" It was a Freezing Charm, meant to lock the helicopter onto the ground or seize up its engines. Instead, there came only a puff of cold air, which blew back into James' face. He tried again, crying out in frustration. "*Salvio hexia! Stupefy! Confundo!*"

He felt the magic of each spell snuff from the wand the moment it appeared. Nearby, parade watchers observed him with worried confusion, wondering at the odd boy with the green-tipped stick.

"Let me try, James," Petra said firmly. She raised her hand again, fingers splayed.

"Petra!" Merlin warned sternly, but the bolt of light shot from her hand even as he spoke. It leapt toward the helicopter, but exploded after only a few feet, illuminating the street around Petra brilliantly but briefly. The crowd recoiled in alarm, but the scene around the helicopter remained unchanged.

"Morgan's power is identical to yours!" Merlin roared. "She is preventing you from interfering! There is no way to thwart their plan! If there were, I would do it myself!"

"Don't listen to him, my dear!" Judith called out suddenly, cupping her hands to her smiling mouth. "He is weak! Only you know how weak he is!"

James glanced helplessly toward Judith. Next to her, Morgan had regained her feet. She had been hurt by her encounter with the lamppost—blood trickled from beneath her hair, staining her face—but her eyes were clear and cold, studying the scene before her.

Petra narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at Merlin.

"Don't let them hurt my dad!" James cried, unable to contain himself. "Please, Petra!"

"I don't intend to," she answered immediately, her eyes still locked upon Merlin.

"There is nothing that can be done, Ms. Morganstern," the Headmaster announced, raising his voice. He stepped into the street now, moving to get between Petra and the police helicopter. "Awful as this may be, Morgan's magic is far too great for us to defeat by subtle means, and the consequences would be disastrous if you intervened using overt methods. There are too many observers. You *must* recognize that."

When Petra spoke again, her voice was calm yet unnaturally loud. "You're *wrong*," she said flatly.

And then, to James' surprise and dismay, she turned around. Together, the two girls began to walk down the center of the New York street, away from the police helicopter as its rotors whooshed faster and faster, turning into a blur.

"Petra!" James called again, but his voice was drowned out by the increasing whine. Merlin's voice, however, rang out as clear as thunder over the packed, watching street.

"Petra Morganstern," he called. "Stop! Return to me."

"I think the Lady is right," Petra declared without looking back. "Your strength is in the vast expanses of nature. Here, in the deepest heart of the city, you are cut off from your powers. You are diminished almost to the point of helplessness."

"It would be a mistake to assume that, Ms. Morganstern," Merlin warned, and yet Petra walked on, increasing her stride as purpose seemed to pour into her. At her side, Izzy matched her sister's pace, hand in hand.

"I am different from you, though," Petra called out. "I am a sorceress. My power does not come from the wastes of nature. I sensed this truth the first time I set foot in New Amsterdam. *My* power comes from the web of the city, from the interconnected knot of humanity that lives and strives here. The thrum of their lives empowers me. I am a *new* kind of sorceress and *this* is my element. Here, you are no match for me. Here, I will do what no one but me can do. I will protect those who have protected me using *whatever means are necessary*." Petra raised her hand and one of the halted parade floats jerked sideways, sliding out of her way. It rammed into a line of dumpsters with a rattling crash.

The crowd observed this with growing alarm. Throngs began to break out into the street, running in all directions. Oblivious of this, the police helicopter first tilted forward on its skids, and then began to float upward, its engines falling into a steady roar. Above it, the W.U.L.F. agents swirled into position, raising their wands.

"You are mistaken!" Merlin cried out, beginning to follow Petra down the broad thoroughfare. "Petra! Remember the error of Eve! You will do far more harm than good!"

"Enough killing," Petra said with calm ferocity. "Enough *death*. No more. I cannot allow it, no matter the price."

"Petra!" Merlinus cried, and raised his staff to strike her. A bolt of white light sprang from it, connecting with the slight girl, but it had no effect upon her. Neither Petra nor Izzy looked back.

Above the din of the crowd and the roar of the rising helicopter, James heard Judith laughing triumphantly.

"Go forth, my sister Fates!" she cried shrilly. "Do what you were made to do! Together, you are more powerful than life and death! Call forth the chaos you have earned!" She laughed again, and at her side, Morgan blinked. She looked askance at Judith and frowned.

Oblivious of this, Petra raised her hand again and a second parade float lofted into the air, spinning gently. It crashed into a gas station, knocking the canopy over and shattering the windows of the small convenience store beneath it. Another float flew over the crowd and smashed against the

columns of a bank before crashing onto the steps below. Muggle New Yorkers ran in all directions, screaming in panic.

James was jostled from all sides as the crowd fled around him. He peered up, looking in the direction that Petra was walking. The avenue stretched away before him, wide as a river, leading toward the night-glitter of the ocean. Framed between the buildings, shining in a grid of spotlights, was the Statue of Liberty.

Suddenly, for no reason, James thought of his ride on the *Lincoln Zephyr* and his conversation with Chancellor Franklyn about the conjoined Muggle and magical cities that had even then unrolled past the train's windows. *The New Amsterdam Department of Magical Administration requested assistance from a foreign ally*, Franklyn had said, *in the guise of a very unique and gifted witch...*

"Petra Morganstern!" Merlin roared, stopping in the street, his staff held aloft next to him and his left hand raised imploringly. "Stop! Remember that the heart is sometimes a liar! You do not know what you are about to do!"

And to James' surprise, Petra did stop. Next to her, hand in hand, Izzy stopped as well. They looked up at the huge shining statue in the distance.

A uniquely talented foreign witch, James thought wonderingly, amazed in spite of the circumstances, *whose only job is to maintain the world's most perfect Disillusionment Charm*.

When Petra spoke, her voice rang out as loud as a cyclone yet as clear as silver bells. She spoke in the language of the giant witch before her.

"*Chère Madame*," she said, lifting her chin to the distant statue, "*baissez votre torche.*"¹

The entire crowd heard it, and paused even in their panic. Every eye turned toward the great woman's statue where it stood over the ocean, glowing greenly in its web of lights. When it moved, the metallic groan and creak carried through the clear air. Lady Liberty first turned her head, looking over her monstrous shoulder toward the city behind her. Her calm eyes spied Petra and Izzy where they stood in the center of the avenue. And then, so ponderously that the entire action seemed to occur in slow motion, the statue's raised right arm began to lower, bringing down its lit, golden torch.

The crowd gasped. It was a long, terrible sound, punctuated by the creaking moan of the distant copper figure. The arm lowered, lowered, and Lady Liberty began to hunker down, her great flowing robes pooling beneath her. She dropped her calm gaze to the ocean waves around her and then, with irreversible, balletic grace, plunged her torch into the ocean, extinguishing it.

A silent, grey explosion of water came up around it. From this came a sort of invisible, penetrating shock wave. It spread over the entire city, leaving a stunning numbness in its wake.

1

"*Dear Lady, lower your torch.*"

All around, the crowd had fallen completely quiet. Every eye blinked, looking around the city as if seeing it for the first time. Next to James, a man in a tweed cap peered up at a nearby skyscraper.

"They're...," he breathed, his voice a high, worried tremolo. "They're... *flying!*"

James understood. The entire Muggle city was seeing for the first time the magical city that overlay it, covering it like a blanket. Eyes bulged up at the flying highways of brooms and magical buses, the heretofore unseen entryways, facades, and bridges built directly into the sides of Muggle skyscrapers.

And nearby, delightedly, the Lady of the Lake cackled.

Television cameras swiveled atop their gantries, zooming in on the sudden magical city which had appeared inexplicably out of nowhere. The police helicopter dipped dramatically as the pilot became aware of the sudden wizarding air traffic that surrounded his craft. The whine of the rotors rose to a distressed scream as the machine wobbled back down toward the intersection, struggling to avoid the nearby traffic lights and power lines. The landing gear touched the pavement and scraped along it, sending up a screech and a curtain of sparks. A moment later, the machine ground to a halt and the rotors began to power down.

Doors shuttled open on the helicopter's side and bursts of magical red light shone from within. Titus Hardcastle jumped out, brandishing his spare wand and firing it immediately into the W.U.L.F. assassins above. They shot back with red and green curses, but were suddenly distracted by a spray of gunfire. Fortunately for Titus, the Muggle police below had recovered enough from their shock to remember their weapons. The officers scrambled behind a line of nearby vehicles, shooting randomly into the air at the swooping hooded figures. Harry Potter followed Titus out of the helicopter and strode purposefully toward Price, the Magical Integration Bureau agent, who shrank away from him. Harry reached for him, but only to pluck his own wand from the man's inner coat pocket.

Pandemonium erupted throughout the street, echoing the clamor that arose throughout the entire city.

In Times Square, traffic snarled to a messy halt around dozens of accidents. Cabbies leapt from their stalled vehicles and turned their faces upward, toward the dozens of enormous magical signs that had suddenly appeared, hovering over them. Dominating them all, completely obscuring the Muggle Coca-Cola neon, was a monstrous grinning woman with clockwork arms, mechanically raising and lowering a car-sized tin of Wymnot's Wand Polish and Enchant-Enhancer. Every ten seconds, her teeth sparkled magically, popping like a gigantic flash bulb.

In Central Park, horses spooked and bolted before their carriages as an amateur Clutchcudgel match suddenly sprang into view over the lake, producing screams from the nearby joggers and feeders of ducks.

Along the newly erected elevated expansion of the New York City Subway system, a conductor encountered the shocking sight of a magical train as it barreled straight toward him, popping into existence along the same length of track. Panicked, the Muggle conductor jammed the

brakes. Lights flickered throughout the crowded compartments as sparks flew up from the locked wheels. The subway train squealed, lurched, and then derailed. Passenger cars jackknifed into zigzag patterns on the raised tracks, still screeching forward under the force of their inertia. Windows shattered and screams filled the cars, even as the magical train before it leapt into the air, spun sideways, and vanished beneath the elevated tracks, zooming onward.

Lincoln Tunnel became the sight of forty car pileup as motorists suddenly confronted the shocking sight of a flying hippogriff and its rider, swooping low over the traffic, its wingtips brushing the roofs of buses.

At LaGuardia Airport, alarms sounded at every terminal. Klaxons rang out over the runways, forcing planes to brake even as they lined up for takeoff. Airliners suddenly pulled up in mid-landing as warning beacons lanced out, warning pilots of the thousands of unidentified flying objects which had suddenly appeared, crowding the New York airspace.

Throughout the entire city, Muggles clamored to the windows of their apartments and office buildings, gaping at the strange flashing lights, alien billboards, and flying magical traffic. Some became alarmed enough to produce guns and make their way into the streets, demanding answers from the strange people that had suddenly appeared. Shots rang out, mostly aimed into the air, at the mysterious flying traffic, although, thankfully, very few bullets actually struck their marks.

Across the country, televisions tuned to the event. Muggle viewers sat awestruck, disbelieving their own eyes as the networks interrupted their normal broadcasts, preempting them with live footage of the incredible scenes in New York City. Around bars, living rooms, and hospital waiting rooms, televisions were turned up as viewers fell silent, slack-jawed. CNN showed a live shot of the Statue of Liberty, suddenly and shockingly hunkered on her base, her torch plunged into the ocean up to her copper wrist. The running banner along the bottom of the screen read, 'NY SENATOR CHARLES FILMORE FOUND DEAD/UNEXPLAINED MASS PHENOMENON OVERWHELMS NYC...'

And in the center of the Memorial Day parade route, Merlinus Ambrosius moved through the rioting throng, gathering James, Zane, and Ralph close to him, looking down at the pathetic form of Lucy Weasley, dead in Ralph's strong arms. Harry Potter pushed toward them through the crowd, his face stern. Behind him, shooting Stunning Spells up at the swirling W.U.L.F. assassins and the running looters that had suddenly appeared, stalked Titus Hardcastle.

Merlin surveyed them all gravely and then turned his gaze to the pandemonium that was unfolding all around.

"What happened?" Harry called out, surveying the rioting crowd.

With grim composure, Merlin replied, "Ms. Morganstern has relieved the world of its ignorance."

Just like Eve, James thought, frowning sadly. She isn't evil, just mistaken. She ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, and then she gave it to the rest of the world. He shuddered as another thought occurred to him.

Merlin glanced down at him and his face suddenly looked very old. "What is it, James? What do you know?"

James sighed. "I was just thinking about Petra and Eve," he replied, and then met the old man's eyes. "I was thinking about how people have always called this city 'the Big Apple'."

Merlin nodded. "The fruit of knowledge," he agreed morosely, "offered to the rest of the world. From here, just as with Eve, there will be no turning back."

All around, the Muggle crowd roared and rioted, boggling up at the magical city above them. Car alarms blared as people abandoned the footpaths and clambered over vehicles. Glass shattered as store windows were broken, inundated by people seeking refuge from the frightening sights all around. Harry Potter and Titus Hardcastle continued to fire their wands into the air, Stunning the remaining W.U.L.F. assassins or chasing them into hiding.

Merlin spoke once more. "Do you know what else they call this city?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he went on. "They call it... 'The City that Never Sleeps'."

With that, he raised his staff in both of his hands, gripping it so tightly that his knuckles whitened. He coiled himself, uttered something incomprehensible in his ancient mother tongue, and plunged the staff back down again, driving it into the pavement like a spike.

A massive flash blinded James. It seemed as large as the sun, but heatless and silent. When James blinked and looked around again, he saw the flash still, like a dome of light. It spread along the canyon of the street, growing larger, rippling noiselessly over the thousands of Muggles gathered there. As it passed over them, lighting them for a moment with its bony glow, they froze in their tracks. Within seconds, the milling, heaving Muggle crowd fell silent and still, petrified by the receding blast, like ten thousand statues.

The television cameras shut down. Every electric light in the city flickered, buzzed, and went dark. Stoplights winked out over intersections and cars rolled to gentle stops, knocking bumpers dully on the crowded streets. Silence fell over the city as wizarding New Amsterdam surveyed the suddenly inert body of its sister, Muggle New York, silent and dark as a crypt below it.

James turned back toward Merlin and blinked in surprise. James, Ralph, Zane, Harry Potter, and Titus Hardcastle stood in a circle around the space where Merlin had been standing only moments earlier, but the big wizard himself was nowhere in sight. In his place, still vibrating faintly with the shock of its planting, was the rune-covered staff. The runes no longer glowed with their faint inner light. Now they were completely dark.

"Oh no," Harry said into the sudden silence. He shook his head in woeful negation. James looked around at the frozen tableaux of Muggle humanity and then glanced helplessly up at his father. Harry wasn't looking at the human statues that filled the streets, however. He was looking down at the dead figure of his niece, held in Ralph's arms.

"Lucy," he said, his voice barely a whisper. Gently, he took her body from Ralph and cradled it in his own arms.

"The woman is gone," Titus declared somberly, scanning the petrified crowd. "And her protégé is dead."

James blinked and followed Titus' gaze. A figure lay on the ground amidst the sea of human statuary. A hitch rose in James' chest as he broke away from the group and moved toward the shape. When he reached it, he knelt down.

Morgan's hair had fallen across her bloody face, obscuring it. James could see immediately that the girl was dead just as Titus had declared. Protruding from her back, its jeweled handle glinting maliciously, was a silver dagger. For the third time that night, James' eyes blurred with tears. Morgan—the Petra from some other, less fortunate dimension—had merely been Judith's pawn after all. Petra and Izzy, Judith's unknowing and unwitting sister Fates, had been the real prize all along. Once the Lady of the Lake had finished using Morgan, she had disposed of her, quickly and without a second thought.

Morgan's eyes were open, staring calmly at the heel of a petrified man who had frozen in the act of jumping over her body. James bit his lips sorrowfully and then reached forward. As gently as he could, he closed Morgan's eyes.

"We must go," Titus said from behind him, addressing the group. "Merlinus' Petrification Spell may only last a few hours."

James stood up slowly and turned around. Harry drew a deep breath and then, still cradling Lucy's body against his shoulder, lifted his wand to his throat.

"Attention, all magical denizens of New Amsterdam," he called, sending his amplified voice echoing up into the canyons of the buildings. "You must leave this place immediately. It is no longer safe for you here. The city of New Amsterdam is now a compromised zone. Soon, the Muggle city below you will reanimate. When it does..." Here, Harry paused and drew a deep, reluctant breath. "When it does, it will be unsafe for you to be here. For the immediate future, you must evacuate as quickly and as calmly as you can. Take only what you need, and attempt to be gone by morning."

Overhead, the magical city began to rumble nervously. The flying highways and byways, which had paused in alarm during the massive flash of Merlin's Petrification Spell, fell into frantic, zooming motion.

Harry pocketed his wand and took James' hand in his own.

"I have sent word to your mother," he said. "She and your brother and sister will Apparate here soon to meet us, and your aunt, uncle, and cousin Molly will follow them shortly." He looked aside, inviting Ralph and Zane into the conversation as well. "Tell me exactly what happened, all of you, so that I may be prepared to give Percy and Audrey this awful news."

James drew a deep, shuddering breath, but Zane answered first.

"She died trying to save Izzy," he said gravely. "There's a lot more to the story, but that's the most important thing. That's the only part that really matters."

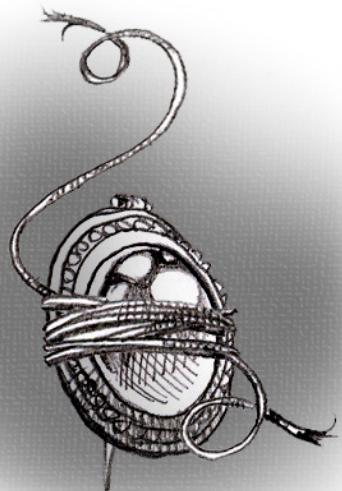
Together, as the group set out toward the nearby waterfront, weaving through the throng of Muggle statues, the three boys began to tell their tale.

The Lady of the Lake was gone, vanished away into hiding, as were Petra and Izzy.

Morgan, the unfortunate Petra from another dimension, lay dead with the ugly dagger still protruding from her back.

Confetti still sifted down into the eerily frozen, suddenly darkened streets.

And Merlinus Ambrosius was no more.



25. THOSE WHO STAYED BEHIND

Denniston Dolohov chose to remain in America, at least for a time.

An envoy from the Crystal Mountain had met Harry Potter and the rest on the docks that very night—the Night of the Unveiling, as it soon came to be called. Benjamin Franklyn was among the representatives from the American wizarding government, as was Professors Jackson and, to James' surprise, Persephone Remora, who was looking decidedly less composed than usual. Together, they extended their official condolences to Percy, Audrey, and Molly for their loss. Percy accepted this somewhat blankly, as if he was in shock. Audrey refused to look at her visitors or anyone else. Her eyes were red and swollen as she hugged Molly to her. Molly, James noticed, was sucking the first two fingers of her right hand—something she hadn't done since she was five years old.

Next, the envoy acknowledged Harry and Titus' innocence in the death of Senator Charles Filmore, but warned that this would be rather harder to prove to the Magical Integration Bureau. Franklyn vowed to do his diplomatic best on their behalf, but made no promises.

Finally, the envoy turned their attention to Denniston Dolohov, who had Side-Along Apparated directly to the harbor with Percy Weasley. James was surprised at what they said. They officially requested that Dolohov remain with them for the immediate future to help with the security and ambassadorial demands of the coming days and weeks. Being an expert on Muggle/magical security, as well as a Squib who had been raised among Muggles, Dolohov was just the sort of individual to assist in the daunting task at hand—that of protecting the city of New Amsterdam and explaining its existence to the Muggle New Yorkers beneath it. Somewhat reluctantly (although not, James suspected, as reluctantly as he let on), Dolohov agreed.

James would have liked to have had more time to say goodbye to his friends, but it was an emergency situation and he understood.

"Bye Zane," he said, reaching to shake the boy's hand where they stood on the dark pier. "The ship will be here any moment, so..."

Zane threw an arm around James' shoulders and drew him into a fierce embrace. When he released his friend, Zane's face was pale and tense. "This changes everything, doesn't it?"

James shrugged and then nodded. "That's what Merlin said back when the Vault was first broken into."

"Do you think the old man's really gone for good?"

James did. He nodded.

"See you, James," Ralph sighed. "I wish I didn't have to stay behind."

"You'll be back soon enough," James assured him. "Just be careful. Things are like to be pretty dodgy around here for the next bit."

Ralph nodded morosely. "I know it probably won't be much better back home, but still... this is where it's all beginning. I'd really love to just put the whole mess behind me for awhile."

"Sorry," James said seriously. "I know. Try to get home soon."

A foghorn echoed over the dark water of the harbor. James turned and saw the silhouette of a low ship approaching, weaving its way through the much larger ships moored nearby. Soon, the magical ship—not the *Gwyndemere* this time—would be at the dock. He and his family would climb the gangplank to its deck, leaving the rest of his traveling companions behind. His heart was low as he turned back to his friends once more.

"Take care of yourselves," he said. "We can keep up via the Shard. You have mine and I can use Dad's. Don't forget."

"We won't," Ralph assured him. "Tell Rose and the rest we said hi."

James rolled his eyes, dreading the task of explaining all of this to Rose, but he nodded anyway.

The ship swept slowly into position alongside the pier. Ropes thumped to the dock and were secured to nearby bollards. The gangplank appeared.

It took only a few minutes for the Potters and Weasleys to climb aboard. Apart from a few hastily packed bags gathered by James' mum, they had left most of their things behind, abandoned, at least for now.

Shortly, the ship was underway, gliding smoothly across the black waves beneath a cloudy night sky. James and Albus' owls, Nobby and Flynn, had flown to meet them at the pier and now circled the ship like silent kites, alighting occasionally on the ship's masts. James leaned against the stern railing and watched. The New York skyline was eerily dark, lit only by the relatively dimmer lights of New Amsterdam.

"Why do you think she did it?" James asked quietly. Next to him, also leaning on the railing, Albus shrugged.

"To save Dad and Titus. Right?"

James shook his head vaguely. "I don't know." He thought for a long moment, and then said, "She could have done it some other way. Don't you think? She could have... I don't know... battled Morgan right there on the street and broken her spell over the helicopter. Or perhaps she could have just thought all those W.U.L.F. killers to death. She can do that kind of thing, you know. She doesn't even need a wand."

Albus nodded. "Yeah," he agreed doubtfully. "But I guess she'd just had enough with death. Don't you think?"

James sighed deeply. He thought of the journey Judith had forced them to take through the Nexus Curtains—all the killings and mayhem she had made them witness, all the loved ones murdered for the sake the struggle against evil. Even that had been part of Judith's plan, pushing Petra to make her final, ultimate decision.

"She wasn't just trying to save Dad," James finally said. "She was trying to change it all. It was probably a huge mistake... and it'll probably end in even more death... but maybe she was just tired of things being the way they are. Maybe this was just her final act of rejection."

Albus frowned. "Rejection of what?"

James shook his head. "Everything," he said grimly. "Just... everything."

Albus considered this. After a minute, he stirred and dug his hand into his back pocket.

"Here," he said, holding something out to James.

"My wand," James said, taking the wooden shaft from his brother's hand. "You found it down on the Clutch field?"

Albus shrugged and leaned on the railing again. "I thought you'd want it. I went looking for it after you lot went dimension-hopping."

James shook his head slowly. "I'll never figure you out, little brother," he said appreciatively.

"Don't even try," Albus replied.

James nodded and rejoined his brother, leaning on the railing and watching the oily black waves.

Below-decks, James knew, his mum was putting Lily to bed, probably singing a nighttime song to her just as if everything was normal. Elsewhere, possibly in the captain's quarters, his father and Titus Hardcastle were discussing what was to come. Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey had gone down to their berth immediately, doomed to sleep in the same ship that bore their dead daughter. Molly had already been asleep by then, held in her mother's arms. James guessed that Aunt Audrey would probably not let go of her for the entire night, but would sleep sitting upright on the bed, leaning against the headboard, taking what comfort she could from the sleeping breath of her surviving child.

Lucy was dead. It struck James as completely impossible and ridiculous. Reluctantly, he replayed the memory of her last moments, recalled the horrible helplessness of watching Judith raise her hand with murder in her eyes. Lucy had been trying to save Izzy, and had acted almost without thinking, rushing forward into the teeth of her own doom.

With a shudder and a dry sob, James realized two things: that Lucy really was gone, and that he had loved her. It hadn't been the same sort of love that he felt for Petra, but it hadn't merely been the love of a cousin either.

Could he have done something to save her? Should he have acted sooner? Or held her back somehow? Heat rushed to his cheeks as he considered this, and felt the first deep pangs of regret.

I'm sorry, Lucy, he said in his thoughts, in the deepest depths of his heart, almost as if it were a prayer. *I should have done something. I should have stopped her from hurting you. Forgive me...*

In response, he remembered Lucy on the day of the Valentine's dance, when he had almost kissed her for the first time. *I forgave you that very night*, she'd admitted shyly, *I can't stay mad at you...*

But it was only a memory. Lucy's voice was stilled forever. Tears pricked James' eyes, but he refused them. He knew that if he let them come, they wouldn't stop coming for a long time, and he was just too tired to go through that now. He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, pushing the tears away. Next to him, purposely not watching, Albus sighed sadly.

Beneath them, the ship cut a smooth wake through the harbor, heading out into the ocean and leaving the half-dark twin cities behind.

James felt terribly alone. Somewhere out there, falling further and further behind them, were Petra and Izzy. And what of Judith, the Lady of the Lake? Had she retreated back into the World Between the Worlds? James thought not. This was her world now—her chaos. She wouldn't miss it, no matter what. James had a strong, sinking feeling that none of them had seen the last of her.

Eventually, the pressing darkness became too much for James and Albus. Without a word, they walked along the deck and found the doorway that led below. They followed the corridor until they discovered the berth that belonged to their parents. Harry was there now, along with Ginny, who was indeed singing to Lily as she drifted to sleep.

At least they were still all together. That counted for a lot, if not everything.

That night, the five of them stayed together in a single berth, piled like cats on the two large beds.

The next morning, James unpacked what clothes he had. They had been hastily gathered by his own mum from his dormitory room before she'd Disapparated to meet them at the pier, and she had forgotten his favorite pair of jeans. He sighed, reminding himself to ask Ralph or Zane to send them to him, and was about to toss his duffle bag beneath the bunk when he noticed something tumbling loosely in the bag's bottom. He raised it again and peered inside. In the darkness was a small bundle of parchment, closed so tightly that it didn't show the slightest seam. James recognized it immediately and his heart trip-hammered.

He touched the packet briefly, but nothing happened—no overwhelming visions or telepathic blasts. Carefully, he retrieved the packet and laid it on the small table of his room. Feeling a strange mixture of hope and trepidation, he tapped the packet with his wand, whispering the spell that would open it.

The parchments unfurled, blooming, as before, like an origami flower, but the pages were no longer covered with Petra's handwriting. Now, there was only one line, written in the center of the top page. James leaned over the parchment, his brow furrowing as he read.

Remember the silver thread. You didn't let go. For better or worse, I'll never forget that.

She hadn't signed it, but then again, she hadn't needed to. James closed the parchment packet again and simply stared at it. Finally, after nearly a minute, he picked it up. He put his wand in his right back pocket and the parchment packet in the left.

There, he carried it from then on, until the very last time he ever saw her.

The end.