

James Potter

AND THE HALL
OF ELDERS' CROSSING



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Based upon the characters and worlds of J.K. Rowling

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AFTERWORD

“See how Mr. Pink does it?” Mr. Saffron said, following closely and glancing around. “Knows to trust his information, he does. No sentry, no problems. Right, Mr. Pink?”

Mr. Grey trailed behind Mr. Saffron, frowning massively and watching the mysterious doors. There were hundreds--maybe thousands--of them along the endless corridor. None had names or markings of any kind. In the lead, Mr. Pink could be heard counting softly under his breath.

“Why do I have to be Mr. Grey?” Mr. Grey said petulantly. “Nobody likes grey. It’s hardly even a color at all.”

The goblin ignored him. After several minutes, Mr. Pink stopped walking. Mr. Saffron and Mr. Grey halted behind him, looking around the corridor with furrowed brows.

“Can’t be the place, Mr. Pink,” the goblin said. “There’s no doors in this section at all. Are yeh sure yeh counted aright?”

“I counted right,” Mr. Pink said. He glanced down at the floor, and then scuffed at a section of the marble tile with his toe. There was a chip in the corner of one of the tiles. Mr. Pink grunted and knelt down. He probed the broken corner with a finger. He nodded to himself, then hooked his finger into the hole and gave a tug. A rectangular section of the tile floor popped upwards, pulled open by Mr. Pink’s tugging finger. He heaved and the rectangular chunk of floor slid upwards like a long, vertical drawer, rising with a grating rumble until it touched the ceiling. It shuddered into place. It was as wide and tall as a door, but only a few inches thick. Mr. Grey peered around it and could see the endless corridor of the Hall of Mysteries stretching away behind it.

“How’d yeh know that was there?” Mr. Saffron demanded, slitting his eye up at Mr. Pink.

“She told me,” Mr. Pink responded, shrugging.

“She did, did she? Anything else you might know that you hain’t told us about, yet?”

“Just enough to get us there,” Mr. Pink replied. “You’re the lock breaker, Mr. Grey is the heavy hand, and I’m the mapper. We all know what we need to know, and nothing else.”

“Yar, yar, I remember,” the goblin grumbled. “Let me get on with it, then, won’t yeh?”

Mr. Pink stood aside as Mr. Saffron moved closer to the slab of mysterious stone. He studied it carefully, squinting and muttering. He laid one of his huge ears against it and tapped here and there. Finally, he reached into a pocket of his black shirt and produced a complicated device made of dozens of brass loops. He unfolded one and peered through it at the stone slab.

Of course, Ted and Victoire were also on the train. Ted, a seventh year, had been so quickly absorbed into a noisy throng of returning friends and classmates that he'd barely had time to wave and wink at James before disappearing into a crammed compartment from which emanated the thump of music on a sleek new wireless. Victoire, five years older than he, had invited him to sit with her during the trip, but James wasn't as comfortable with her as he was with Rose, and didn't relish the idea of listening to her prattle on with the four other girls in her compartment about pixie powder blushes and hair care charms. Being part Veela, Victoire had never had any problem making friends of either gender, quickly and effortlessly. Besides, something in James felt that he needed to assert himself as an individual straight off, even if the thought left him feeling nervous and lonely.

It wasn't that he was worried about going to Hogwarts exactly. He'd been looking forward to this day for most of his life, ever since he was old enough to understand what it meant to be a wizard, ever since his mum had told him of the school he'd one day attend, the secret school that witches and wizards attended to learn magic. He was positively itching with anticipation of his first classes, of learning to use the brand new wand that he carried proudly in his backpack. More than anything, he was looking forward to Quidditch on the Hogwarts pitch, getting on his first real broom, trying out for the team, maybe, just maybe...

But that was where his excitement began to melt into cold anxiety. His dad had been the Gryffindor Seeker, the youngest one in Hogwarts history. The best he, James, could hope for was to match that record. That's what everyone would expect of him, the first-born son of the famous hero. He remembered the story, told to him dozens of times (although never by his own dad) of how the young Harry Potter had won his first Golden Snitch by virtually jumping off his broom, catching the golden ball in his mouth and nearly swallowing it. The tellers of the tale would always laugh uproariously, delightedly, and if Dad was there, he'd smile sheepishly as they clapped him on the back. When James was four, he found that famed Snitch in a shoe box in the bottom of the dining room hutch. His mum told him it'd been a gift to Dad from the old school headmaster. The tiny wings no longer worked, and the golden ball had a thin coat of dust and tarnish on it, but James was mesmerized by it. It was the first Snitch he had ever seen close up. It seemed both smaller and larger than he'd imagined, and the weight of it in his small hand was surprising. *This is the famous Snitch*, James thought reverently, *the one from the story, the one caught by my dad*. He asked his dad if he could keep it, stored in the shoebox when he wasn't playing with it, in his room. His dad agreed easily, happily, and James moved the shoebox from the bottom of the hutch to a spot under the head of his bed, next to his toy broom. He pretended the dark corner under his headboard was his Quidditch locker. He spent many an hour pretending to zoom and bank over the Quidditch green, chasing the fabled Snitch, in the end, always catching it in a fantastic diving crash, jumping up, producing his dad's tarnished Snitch for the approval of roaring imaginary crowds.

But what if James couldn't catch the Snitch, as his father had done? What if he wasn't as good on the broom? Uncle Ron had said that riding a broom was in the Potter blood as sure as dragons breathed fire, but what if James proved him wrong? What if he was slow, or clumsy, or fell off? What if he didn't even make the team? For the rest of the first years, that would only be a mild disappointment. Even though the

“A Himalayan yeti whisker. Very rare, according to the man we bought it from. Cost my dad twenty Galleons. Which translates to a good bit, I think.” He studied Zane’s and James’ faces in turn. “Er, why?”

James raised his eyebrows. “It’s just that I’ve never heard of a Himalayan yeti.”

Ralph sat up and leaned forward earnestly. “Sure! You know what those are. Some people call them abominable snowmen. I always thought they were imaginary, you know. But then on my birthday, my dad and me found out I was a wizard, and I’d always thought wizards were imaginary, too! Well, now I’m learning about all kinds of crazy things that I thought were imaginary that are turning out to be true.” He picked up his booklet again and fanned the pages with one hand, gesturing vaguely with the other.

“Just out of curiosity,” James said carefully, “where did you buy your wand?”

Ralph grinned. “Oh, well we thought that was going to be the hard part, didn’t we? I mean, there don’t seem to be wand merchants on every corner where we come from, which is Surrey. So we got down here to the city early and followed the directions to that Diagon Alley place. No problem! There was a man right there on the street corner with a little booth.”

Zane was watching Ralph with interest.

“A little booth,” James prodded.

“Yeah! Of course, he didn’t have the wands right there in the open. He was selling maps. Dad bought one and asked directions to the best wandmaker in town. My dad develops security software. For computers. Did I mention that? Anyway, he asked for the best, most state of the art wandmaker. Turned out the man was an expert wandmaker himself. Only makes a few a year, but keeps them special for people who really know what they are looking for. So Dad bought the best one he had.”

James was trying to keep his face straight. “The best one he had,” he repeated.

“Yeah,” Ralph confirmed. He dug in his own backpack and pulled out something about the size of a rolling pin, wrapped in brown paper.

“The one with the yeti core,” James confirmed.

Ralph suddenly glanced at him, halfway through unwrapping the package he’d removed from his backpack. “You know, it starts sounding a little silly when you say it, doesn’t it?” he asked a bit morosely. “Ah, bugger.”

He pulled the brown paper off. It was about eighteen inches long and as thick as a broomstick. The end had been whittled to a dull point and painted lime green. They all stared at it. After a moment, Ralph looked a bit desperately at James. “It’s not really good for anything magical, is it?”

James tilted his head. “Well, it’d be a treat for killing vampires with, I’d think.”

rebuilt, and all the old secret passages were permanently sealed off. Funny thing about a magical castle, though. It just seems to grow new secret passages. We've only found two, and those only because of Petra and our Ravenclaw friends here. St. Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive is one of them. It's all right there in his slogan."

Noah pointed to the words engraved into the statue's base: *Igitur Qui Moveo, Qui et Movea.*

Ted made a grunt of triumph and there was a loud click. "You'll never guess where it was this time," he said, puffing from beneath the statue. With a grind of moving stone, the statue of St. Lokimagus straightened up as much as his humped back would allow, stepped carefully off his plinth, and then walked across the corridor with a slightly bowlegged gait. He disappeared into the door opposite, which James saw was a boys' bathroom.

"What's his slogan mean?" James asked as the Gremlins began to duck hurriedly into the low doorway on the back of St. Lokimagus' plinth. Noah grinned and shrugged. "When you gotta go, you gotta go."

The passage led to a short stairway with rounded stone steps. The Gremlins pounded noisily up the steps, and then shushed each other as they reached a doorway. Ted creaked the door open a fraction, peering through the crack. A moment later he pushed the door wide and motioned for the rest to follow him outside.

The door opened inexplicably out of a small shed near what James recognized as the Quidditch pitch. The tall grandstands rose into the moonlight, looking bleak and imposing in the silence.

"The passage only works one way," Sabrina explained to James and Zane as the group ran lightly across the Quidditch pitch toward the hills beyond. "If you go into it without having come through St. Lokimagus' tunnel first you just find yourself in the equipment shed. Pretty convenient, since it means that even if we get caught, nobody else can chase us back through the tunnel."

"*Have* you gotten caught yet?" James asked, puffing along next to her.

"No, but this is the first time we've tried to use it. We only discovered it at the end of last year." She shrugged as if to say *we'll see how this turns out, won't we?*

Zane's voice came out of the darkness behind James, conversationally. "What if St. Magic Buns gets done with the loo before we all come back through his hole?" James shuddered at Zane's turn of phrase, but admired his logic. It seemed like a question worth asking.

"That's definitely a question for a Ravenclaw," Noah called back as quietly as he could, but nobody answered.

After ten minutes of skirting the border of a scraggly, moonlit wood, the group clambered over a wire fence into a field. Ted pulled his wand from his back pocket as he approached a patch of rambling bushes

The elf looked down at the piece of paper Zane had just handed him. He raised his eyes again. "Thank you, young master. Will there, er, be anything else?"

Zane flapped his hand dismissively. "No, thanks. Go get some sleep or something. You look tired."

The elf looked at Ralph, then James, who shrugged and tried to smile. With a barely perceptible roll of the eyes, the elf tucked the five dollar bill into his napkin and disappeared under the table.

Zane looked thoughtful. "I could get used to this."

"I don't think you're supposed to tip the house-elves," Ralph said uncertainly.

"I don't see why not," Zane said airily, stretching. "My dad tips everybody when he's travelling. He says it's part of the local economy. And it fosters good service."

"And you can't just tell a house-elf to go get some sleep," James said, suddenly realizing what had just happened.

"Why the heck not?"

"Because that's exactly what he'll have to go and do!" James said in exasperation. He was thinking of the Potter family house-elf, a sad little pug of an elf whose moroseness was only offset by his sheer bloody-minded determination to do exactly what was asked of him. It wasn't that James didn't like Kreacher. It was just that you had to learn precisely *how* to ask things of Kreacher. "House-elves have to do what is asked of them by their masters. It's just the kind of beings they are. He's probably heading back to his cupboard, or shelf, or wherever it is he sleeps even now and trying to work out how he's going to sleep in the middle of the morning." James shook his head, and then realized it struck him funny. He tried not to smile, which only made it worse. Zane saw it and pointed at him.

"Ha ha! You think it's funny, too!" he chortled.

"I can't imagine that they have to do everything *we* ask of them," Ralph said, his brow furrowed. "We're just students. We don't own the place or anything. And we're just first years."

"You remembered the name of the spell Sabrina used to make the Wocket look like a rocket?" James asked, turning to Zane, impressed.

"*Visum-ineptio*," Zane said, relishing the sound of it. "It means something like 'eye-fooling'. If you work through the Latin, you can sort of figure it out. Horace says it just helps people see what they think they are going to see."

James frowned. "So when that beam of light came out of the sky onto that farmer, he, sort of, *expected* to see an alien spaceship?"



3. THE GHOST AND THE INTRUDER

James awoke early. The room was silent but for the breathing of his fellow Gryffindors and the whistling snore of Noah several beds away. The light in the room was only a few shades above night, a sort of pearly rose color. James tried to go back to sleep, but his mind was too full of all the unknowns that he was sure to experience in the next twelve hours. After a few minutes, he swung his feet out of bed and began to dress.

The halls of Hogwarts, while relatively quiet and empty, seemed busy in a completely different way this early in the morning. Dewy coolness and morning shadows filled the spaces, but there was a hint of busy commotion just out of sight behind unmarked doors down flights of narrow steps. As James moved among the corridors and passed empty classrooms that would later be filled with activity, he caught secondhand clues of the house-elf activity that thrived in the morning hours: a bucket and mop, still dripping, propped open a bathroom door; the scent of baking bread and the clatter of pots and pans drifted up a short flight of stairs; a row of windows stood with tapestries draped carefully out of them for airing.

Jackson turned his head and finally looked at the parchment in his hand as the class erupted into gales of laughter. He smiled a small but genuine smile. “Unfortunately, Mr. Walker, your subtracted five points cancel out Miss Gallows’ awarded five points. Ho hum. Such is life.”

He began to pace around the room again, placing the drawing carefully back onto Zane’s desk as he passed. “No, magic is not, as it were, simply a magic word. In reality, the true wizard learns to imprint his own personality on the paper using a means *other* than the quill. Nothing unnatural occurs. There is simply a different medium of expression taking place. Magic exploits the natural laws, but it does not break them. In other words, magic is not unnatural, but it is *supernatural*. That is, it is *beyond* the natural, but not outside it. Another example. Mr. um...”

Jackson pointed at a boy near him, who leaned suddenly back in his chair, looking rather cross-eyed at the pointing finger. “Murdock, sir,” the boy said.

“Murdock. You are of age for Apparition, I am correct?”

“Oh. Yes, sir,” Murdock said, seeming relieved.

“Describe Apparition for us, will you?”

Murdock looked perplexed. “S’pretty basic, isn’t it? I mean, it’s just a matter of getting a place nice and solid in your mind, closing your eyes, and, well, making it happen. Then bang, you’re there.”

“Bang? You say?” Jackson said, his face blank.

Murdock reddened. “Well, yeah, more or less. You just zap there. Just like that.”

“So it is instantaneous, you’d say.”

“Yeah. I guess I’d say that.”

Jackson raised an eyebrow. “You guess?”

Murdock squirmed, glancing at those seated near him for help. “Er. No. I mean, yes. Definitely. Instantaneously. Like you said.”

“Like *you* said, Mr. Murdock,” Jackson corrected mildly. He was moving again, proceeding back toward the front of the room. He touched another student on the shoulder as he went. “Miss?”

“Sabrina Hildegard, sir,” Sabrina said as clearly and politely as she could.

“Would you be so kind as to perform a small favor for us, Miss Hildegard? We require the use of two ten-second timers from Professor Slughorn’s Potions room. Second door on the left, I believe. Thank you.”

“Well, I liked my teacher. Professor Flitwick. You’ve seen him around,” Ralph said, amiably changing the subject.

Zane was undeterred. “Guy’s got eyes in the back of his wig or something. Who’d’ve thought a school of witchcraft would be so sneaky?”

“Professor Flitwick teaches beginning spells and wandwork, doesn’t he?” James asked Ralph.

“Yeah. It was really excellent. I mean, it’s one thing to read about doing magic, but seeing it happen is something else. He made his chair float, books and all!”

“Books?” Zane interjected.

“Yeah, you know that stack of books he keeps on his chair so he can see over the desk? Must be a hundred pounds of them. He floated the chair right off the floor with them still on it, just using his wand.”

“How’d you do at it?” Zane asked. James cringed, thinking of Ralph’s ridiculous wand.

“Not bad, actually,” Ralph said mildly. There was a pause as Zane and James stopped to look at him.

“Really. Not bad,” Ralph repeated. “I mean, we weren’t lifting chairs or anything. Just feathers. Flitwick said he didn’t expect us to get it the first time. But still, I did as well as anybody else.” Ralph looked thoughtful. “Maybe even a little better. Flitwick seemed pretty happy with it. He said I was a natural.”

“You made a feather float with that crazy snowman-whisker log?” Zane asked incredulously.

Ralph looked annoyed. “Yes. For your information, Flitwick says that the wand is just a tool. It’s the wizard that makes the magic. Maybe I’m just talented. Did that occur to you, Mr. Wand-Expert-All-of-a-Sudden?”

“Sheesh, sorry,” Zane mumbled. “Just don’t point that crazy snowman log at me. I wanna keep the same number of arms and legs.”

“Forget it,” James soothed as they started walking again. “Flitwick’s right. Who cares where your wand came from? You really got the feather to levitate?”

Ralph allowed a small grin of pride. “All the way to the ceiling. It’s still up there now! I got it stuck in a rafter.”

“Nice,” James nodded appreciatively.

An older boy in a green tie bumped James, knocking him off the path and into the grass of the courtyard. He bumped into Ralph as well, but Ralph was as tall as the older boy, and rather wider. The boy bounced off Ralph, who didn’t budge.

“Sorry,” Ralph muttered as the boy stopped and glared at him.

“You wouldn’t look quite so, er, interesting, Damien, if you had some white socks,” Sabrina said as diplomatically as she could.

Damien gave her a *tell-me-something-I-don’t-know* look. “Thanks, sweetie. Tell my mum that next time she goes shopping at Sears and bloody Roe-mart”

Zane didn’t bother to correct Damien. He beamed with annoying good cheer, obviously far more comfortable in the outfit than the rest. “I have a good feeling about this. The breeze will air some of you vampires out. Lighten up.”

Damien hooked a thumb toward Zane. “Why is he even *in* this class?”

“He’s right, Damien,” Ted said good-naturedly. “Shake out the old batwings a bit, why don’t you?”

“All right, class,” Curry called, clapping her hands for attention. “Let’s look orderly, shall we? Form two lines, please. Burgundy over here, gold over there. That’s very nice.”

As the lines formed, Professor Curry produced a long basket from under her arm. She paced to the head of the burgundy line. “Wands out,” she called. Each student produced his or her wand and held them at the ready, some of the first years glancing around to see if they were holding theirs correctly. James saw Zane sneak a peek at Ted, then swap his wand from his right hand to his left.

“Excellent,” Curry said, holding the basket out. “In here, then, please.” She began to pace along the line, watching the students reluctantly drop their wands into the basket. There was a mass groan throughout the gathered students. “You all surely can tell your wands apart, I expect. Come, come, if we are to learn anything about the Muggle world, we must learn how to think *non-magically*. That means, of course, no wands. Thank you, Mr. Metzker. Mr. Lupin. Ms. Hildegard. And you, Ms. McMillan. Thank you. Now. Is that everyone?”

A very unenthusiastic noise of assent came from the students.

“Hup, hup, students,” Curry chirped as she laid the basket of wands next to Hagrid’s framework. “Are you implying that you are so dependent upon magic that you are unable to play a simple, a *very* simple game? Hmm?” She glanced around at the students, her sharp nose pointed slightly upwards. “I should hope not. But before we begin, let us have a bit of discussion about why it is important for us to study the ways and means of the Muggle world. Anyone?”

James avoided Curry’s eyes as she looked from student to student. There was silence but for the gusting wind in the nearby trees and the flap of the banners over the castle.

“We learn about Muggles so that we will not forget the fact that, despite our myriad differences, we are all human,” Curry said crisply and emphatically. “When we forget our essential similarities, we forget how to get along, and that cannot but lead to prejudice, discrimination, and eventually, conflict.” She allowed the echo of her words to diminish, and then brightened. “Besides, the non-magical nature of our

“You ‘the Ralphinator’?” Zane asked, still working the GameDeck.

“I’m not even going to answer that,” Ralph said flatly.

“Here we are then,” Zane said, stubbing a finger at the screen. “Does the name ‘Austramaddux’ mean anything to you?”

“No,” Ralph said, raising his eyebrows. “There’s a profile with that name?”

“Right here. Created around midnight day before last. No other info and no game progress at all.”

James blinked. “No game progress?”

“Nope,” Zane said, shutting the device down and passing it back to Ralph under the table. “Plenty of login time, but no actual gaming. Probably couldn’t figure out that D-pad up and the left shoulder button worked the super attack. Newbies.”

James rolled his eyes. “So what’s it mean? Who is Austra-whatsisname?”

“It’s just a made up name, like I said,” Ralph said, stuffing the GameDeck into the bottom of his bag. “It doesn’t mean anything. Right?”

Ralph said the last to Zane, who was sitting across the table looking almost comically thoughtful. He had his head tilted, his brow furrowed, and one corner of his mouth cinched up, dimpling his cheek. After a moment, he shook his head. “I don’t know. It’s familiar. Seems like somebody just mentioned that name, but I can’t place it.”

“Well, all I know,” Ralph said, propping his chin on his hands, “is I’m dumping this thing off with my dad at the break. I’m sorry I ever saw it.”

“Mr. Potter,” a voice suddenly boomed nearby. All three of them jumped. It was Professor Slughorn. He had approached the table and was suddenly standing behind James’ chair. “I had hoped to run into you. So good to see you, my boy. So good indeed.”

James forced a smile as Slughorn patted him on the back. “Thank you, sir.”

“You know, I know your father. Met him when he was a student here and not yet the famous Auror that he is now, of course.” Slughorn nodded knowingly, winking, as if Harry Potter had not, in fact, been enormously famous even before he’d become Head Auror. “He’s mentioned me, no doubt. Very close we were at the time. Of course, I’ve lost track of him in the years since, what with my teaching, pottering about, turning into an old man, and his getting married, developing his illustrious career, and making fine young men like yourself.” Slughorn punched James playfully on the shoulder. “I look forward to catching up with him a bit during his visit next week. Do tell him to look me up, won’t you?”

“I will, sir,” James said, rubbing his shoulder.

“Good, good. Well, I’ll leave you boys to your studies, then. Carry on, er, lads,” Slughorn said, glancing at Ralph and Zane with no apparent recognition, despite the fact that he and Ralph had spoken that very morning.

“Oh. Uh, Professor Slughorn? Could I ask you a question?” It was Zane.

Slughorn glanced back, eyebrows raised. “Why, certainly, er, Mr.?”

“Walker, sir. It was your Potions One class, I believe. You mentioned someone named Austramaddux?”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Walker. Wednesday afternoon, was it? Now I recall.” Slughorn glanced distractedly toward the front desk. “Yes, not really potions-related, but his name did come up. Austramaddux was a historian and Seer from the distant past. His writings are considered, well, apocryphal at best. I believe I was making a little joke, Mr. Walker.”

“Oh. Well, thank you, sir,” Zane replied.

“Never a problem, my boy,” Slughorn assured him, glancing around the library. “And now, I must return to my duties. I’ll not distract you further.”

“That was quite a coincidence,” Ralph whispered, leaning over the desk as Slughorn drifted away.

“Not really,” Zane reasoned. “He mentioned Austramaddux in class as a joke. I remember now. It seemed to be a reference to a source that isn’t all that trustworthy or is a little loopy. The way we’d refer to a tabloid or a conspiracy theory or something. Slughorn’s head of Slytherin House, so he probably uses that same reference among your guys. They’d know it. That’s why the one that made off with your GameDeck knew the name.”

“I suppose,” Ralph said doubtfully.

“But why?” James asked. “Why use a name that means ‘don’t trust me, I’m a loon’?”

“Who knows what dopiness lurks in the hearts of Slytherins?” Zane said dismissively.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” James insisted. “Slytherins are usually all about image. They love all that cloak and dagger stuff, with the dragons’ heads and secret passwords. I just don’t get why one of them would use a name that their own Head of House treats like a joke.”

“Whatever,” Ralph said. “I have actual homework to do, so if you two don’t mind...”

They all spent the next half hour working on their homework. When it was time to pack up, Zane turned to James. “Quidditch tryouts tonight, right?”

“Mine, yeah. Yours, too?”

force, angling into a steep climb. The grandstands fell away. Rows of seats and banners flickered past, and then gave way to an enormous, grey sky.

Motion seemed to stop, despite the air and rain that barreled past him. James risked a glance behind him. The Quidditch pitch looked like a postage stamp, shrinking and growing hazy behind a raft of clouds and mist. James gasped, inhaling wind and rain, panic gripping him like giant claws. He was still climbing. Great grey slabs of cloud barreled past, buffeting him with shocking darkness and cold. James shoved down on the broom again, gritting his teeth and stifling a cry of terror.

He felt the broomstick dip sickeningly, almost hurling him off. He couldn't seem to make it do anything other than drastic altitude changes. James had lost all sense of direction. He was surrounded by rain and dense clouds. For the first time, getting on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team seemed much less important than simply getting both feet back on the ground, wherever it was. He couldn't gauge how fast he was going or in what direction. Wind and mist tore at his face, making his eyes water.

Suddenly, there were other shapes nearby. They swooped around him out of the clouds. He heard distant yelling, calls, his name. One of the shapes angled toward him and James was shocked to see Zane on a broomstick, his face chalk white, his blonde hair whipping wildly around his head. He motioned at James as he banked, but James couldn't make sense of his gestures.

"Follow me!" Zane shouted over the wind as he swooped by.

The other figures resolved as they centered on James. He saw Ted and Gennifer, the Ravenclaw. They moved into formation around him. Ted was calling directions to James, but he couldn't make them out. He concentrated on angling the broom in the direction that Zane was flying. The clouds barreled past again like freight trains, and James lost sight of the other flyers. There was a buffeting shock of cold air, and then the ground opened up beneath James, swaying with enormous finality. The Quidditch pitch was rising to meet him, its matted grass looking very hard and unforgiving. Zane was still ahead of James, but he was pulling back, slowing, gesturing wildly with one hand. James pulled back on his own broomstick, trying to emulate Zane, but the force of the wind roaring past fought him. He battled it, turning, wrestling the broomstick up so that he feared it might snap beneath him. And then his rain-slicked hands slipped, fumbled and he fell backwards, gripping the broom desperately with only his legs. He was spinning wildly, end over end. James felt the force of Zane whipping past, Zane's shouts diminishing behind him with horrible speed. The ground swooped around his head, reaching up to embrace him, and James heard the sound of it, a huge, low roar, getting louder and louder until...

There was a horrible jolt. James squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to hear the sound of his body hitting the ground. There was no sound. He risked opening his eyes just a tiny bit, and then looked around with relief and surprise. He was hovering five feet above the center of the Quidditch pitch, still straddling his broom, but not holding on. Rain hissed all around him as the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors stared at him. Zane, Ted, and Gennifer drifted down around James, gawping at him. Then Ted turned. James followed his eyes.

Ralph stood on the edge of the field, his robes soaked through and sticking to him, an umbrella lying abandoned at the edge of the grandstands. Every muscle in Ralph's body seemed to be tensed, straining, as he held his ridiculous, enormous wand straight out, pointing it at James. He was trembling visibly. Rain streamed down his face, matting his hair to his forehead.

"Do I have to keep this up?" he said through gritted teeth. "Or can I let go now?"

then?” James asked after a minute. He remembered Damien implying there would be some friction between them.

“Oil and water,” Ted replied. “Trelawney tries to make nice, but she obviously hates the voodoo queen. For Delacroix’s part, she doesn’t even pretend to like Trelawney. They’re from two different schools of thought, in every sense of the word.”

“I like Trelawney’s school better,” Petra muttered, scribbling a note on her parchment.

“We all know what you think, dear,” Ted soothed. He turned to James. “Petra likes Trelawney because she knows that, at its heart, divination is really just a set of random variables that you use to order your own thinking. Trelawney thinks it’s all mystical, of course, but she still knows it’s just a bunch of totally subjective mumbo-jumbo. Petra is a facts girl, so she likes that even if Trelawney takes all this stuff seriously, she doesn’t try to make it, you know, rigid.”

Petra sighed and clapped her book shut. “Divination isn’t science. It’s psychology. At least Trelawney gets that in practice, if not in belief. Delacroix...” She threw the book onto the pile next to her, rolling her eyes.

“We have a test this week,” Ted said mournfully. “An actual Divination test. It’s all about some crazy astrological event that’s happening later this year. The linings of the planets or whatever.”

James looked quizzical, “The linings of the planets?”

“*Alignment* of the planets,” Petra said patiently. “Actually, it is a pretty big deal. It only happens once every few hundred years. *That’s* science. Knowing what silly mythical creature each planet represents, what it was a god of to some bunch of dotty primitives, and what it means to ‘the harmonics of the astrological precognition matrix’ isn’t.”

Ted looked at James and frowned. “Someday, we’ll get Petra to reveal her true feelings about it.”

Petra smacked him over the head with one of the larger star charts.

Later, at dinner, James saw Zane and Ralph sitting together at the Ravenclaw table. He saw Zane look over once, and was glad that he didn’t try to come over and talk to him. He knew it was extremely petty of him, but he was still sick with jealousy and the shame of his embarrassment. He ate quickly, and then wandered out of the Great Hall, unsure where he would go.

The evening was pleasant and cool as the sun dipped behind the mountains. James explored the perimeter of the grounds, listening to the song of the crickets and throwing stones into the lake. He went to knock on the door to Hagrid’s cabin, but there was a note on the door, written in large, clumsy letters. The note said that Hagrid was up in the forest until Monday morning. Spending time with Grawp and Grawp’s lady giant friend, James figured. It was beginning to get dark. James turned and headed dejectedly back in the direction of the castle.

Dark wizards had always sought to rule the Muggle world, and apparently, there was some basis to believe that Merlin, the greatest and most powerful wizard of all time, would help them bring that about.

A sudden thought occurred to James, and his eyes widened. He had first heard the name Austramaddux via a profile created by a Slytherin. Slytherin had always been the house of dark wizards intent on domination of the Muggle world. What if the enigmatic mention of Austramaddux wasn't just a meaningless coincidence? What if it was a sign of a new dark plot? What if the Slytherin who had made that profile was part of a plot to facilitate the predicted return of Merlinus Ambrosius, who would lead a final war against the Muggle world?

James closed the book slowly and gritted his teeth. Somehow, the moment he thought of it, it seemed completely true. That explained why a Slytherin would use a name that even his Head of House thought was a joke. The Slytherin knew it wasn't, and would soon be victorious in a plot that would prove it. James' heart pounded as he sat and thought furiously. Who could he tell? Zane and Ralph, of course. They might have already thought of it. His dad? James decided that he couldn't. Not yet, at least. James was old enough to know that most adults wouldn't believe such a story from a kid even if the kid could provide pictures that proved it.

James didn't know exactly what he could do to stop such a plot, but he knew what he had to do next. He had to find out which Slytherin it was that had taken Ralph's GameDeck. He had to find the Slytherin that used the name Austramaddux.

With that in mind, James bolted from the greenhouse as soon as class was over, forgetting entirely that tonight was the night his dad, Harry Potter, was arriving for his meeting with the Americans.



As James ran across the grounds, he became aware of the noise of a crowd. He slowed, listening. Shouts and chants mingled with the babble of raucous, excited voices. As he turned the corner into the courtyard, the noise became much louder. A mob of students roiled around the courtyard, gathering from all directions even as James watched. Most were simply curious to see what the commotion was about, but there was a very active group in the center, marching, chanting slogans, some holding large, hand-painted signs and banners. James saw one of the banners as he approached crowd, and his heart sank. It read 'End Ministry Auror Fascism'. Another sign waved and poked at the sky: 'Tell the TRUTH, Harry Potter!'

“So,” Harry said, frowning slightly, “they can hear us, and see us, and we can see and hear them as well, but they are still there, in America, and we are still here, at Hogwarts. Therefore, we cannot touch them?”

“Precisely,” Franklyn said.

James spoke up. “Then how is it we can touch the cars and so can your mechanics in the States?”

“Excellent question, my boy,” Slughorn said, patting James on the back.

“It is indeed,” Franklyn agreed. “And that is where things get a bit, er, quantum. The simple answer is that these cars, unlike us, are multi-dimensional. You’ve all heard, I expect, the theory that there are more dimensions beyond the four we are familiar with, yes?”

There were nods. James hadn’t heard of any such theory, but he thought he understood the idea nonetheless.

Franklyn went on. “The theory states that there are extra dimensions, unknowable by any of our senses, but just as real. Effectively, Professor Jackson has created a spell that enables these vehicles to tap into those dimensions, allowing them to exist simultaneously in two places anytime they are inside the walls of this Garage. While they are parked here, they cross the dimensional bubble and exist in both places at once.”

“Remarkable,” Slughorn said, running his hand along the fender of the Hornet. “So, effectively, your crew can service the vehicles regardless of where they travel, and you are afforded a view of home, even if you cannot access it.”

“Very true,” agreed Franklyn. “It is indeed both a great convenience and a touch of comfort.”

Neville was interested in the cars themselves. “Are they actual mechanized creatures or are they charmed machines?”

James lost interest as Franklyn launched into a detailed explanation of the winged cars. Walking over to the other side of the tent, he looked out into the grounds of the American school. The sun had just peeked over the roof of the red brick building nearby, casting its rose-colored light onto a clock tower. It was just after six in the morning there. How utterly strange and wonderful, James thought. Tentatively, he reached out his hand, curious to see if he could feel the coolness of the morning air in that other place. He felt a strange, numbing feeling in his fingertips, and then they brushed unseen canvas. Sure enough, he couldn’t pass through or even feel the air of the place.

“Too bad you can’t come on over, friend,” a voice said. James looked up. The head mechanic was leaning against the fender of the Beetle, smiling. “It’s almost breakfast and today’s mushroom omelet day.”

James grinned. “Sounds good. It’s lunchtime, here.”

and dark sides, turning slowly. The entire constellation weaved and turned majestically, dramatically lighting the brass Device and spilling delightful patterns of light over the entire room.

“Nothing so healthy as natural light,” Franklyn said. “Captured here, through the windows, and then condensed within a carefully calibrated network of mirrors and lenses, as you can see. The light is filtered with my own optical spellwork for clarity. The final result is, well, what you see here. Excellent for the eyesight, the blood, and one’s health overall, obviously.”

“This is the secret to your longevity?” Harry asked, rather breathlessly.

“Oh, certainly this is a small part of it,” Franklyn said dismissively. “Mostly, I just prefer it to read by at night. Certainly, it’s more fun than a torch.” He caught James eye and winked.

Professor Jackson appeared in the archway. James saw him glance from Franklyn to the light display overhead, a look of tired disdain on his face. “Dinner, I am told, is served. Shall we adjourn to the dining room or shall I have it brought in here?”

Along with Harry, James, Neville, and the representatives from the Ministry, most of the Hogwarts teaching staff was present, including Professor Curry. To James’ consternation, Curry told Harry all about James’ skills on the football field, assuring him that she would work to see that said skills were developed to their fullest extent.

Contrary to his dad’s suspicion, the meal was remarkably diverse and enjoyable. Madame Delacroix’s gumbo was the first course. She carried it to the table herself, somehow not spilling a drop despite her blindness. Even more curiously, she directed the ladle with her wand, a gnarled and evil-looking length of graperoot, dishing a portion into each bowl at the table while she stared at the ceiling and hummed rather disconcertingly. The gumbo was indeed spicy, thick with chunks of shrimp and sausage, but James liked it. Next came fresh rolls and several varieties of butter, including a brown and sticky goo that Jackson identified as apple butter. James tasted it carefully on a hunk of bread, and then spread a gigantic dollop on the remainder of his roll.

The main course was rack of lamb with mint jelly. James didn’t consider this typical American food, and commented as much.

“There’s no such thing as American food, James,” Jackson said. “Our cuisine, like our people, is simply the sum total of the various world cultures we come from.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Franklyn interjected. “I am pretty sure we can lay undisputed claim to the spicy buffalo wing.”

“Will we be having those tonight?” James asked hopefully.

“My apologies,” Franklyn said. “It is rather difficult to collect the ingredients for such things unless you possess Madame Delacroix’s unique voodoo capabilities.”

structures, all in the name of 'equality'. Once there, they'd push for greater control, more power. They'd win over Muggle leaders, using promises and lies where they could, threats and the Imperius Curse where they couldn't. Eventually, order would break down. Finally, inevitably, there would be all-out war." Harry's voice had gone soft, considering. He turned to Franklyn, who stood watching him, his face calm but dreadful. "And that's what they want, isn't it? War with the Muggle world."

"That's what they've always wanted," Franklyn agreed. "The struggle never stops. It just has different chapters."

"Who's involved?" Harry asked simply.

Franklyn sighed again, hugely, and rubbed his eyes. "It's not so simple. It's virtually impossible to tell the instigators from their followers. There are some individuals it would be instructive to watch closely, though."

"Madame Delacroix."

Franklyn glanced up, studying Harry's face. He nodded. "And Professor Jackson."

James gasped, and then clapped his hand over his mouth. His dad and Professor Franklyn stood very still. James was sure they'd heard him. Then Harry spoke again.

"Anyone else?"

Franklyn shook his head slowly. "Of course. But then you'd just be watching everyone and everything. It's like an infestation of cockroaches in the walls. You can either watch the cracks or burn down the house. Take your pick."

James backed away very carefully, then when he felt safely out of earshot, he turned and retraced his steps back to the Americans' quarters. His heart was pounding so heavily he had been sure that his dad or Professor Franklyn would hear it.

He knew the so-called Progressive Element was no good, but now he knew it must be them that were planning the return of Merlinus Ambrosius, believing he would help them to accomplish their false goal of equality, which would lead inevitably to war. Merlin had said that he would return when the balance between Muggles and wizards was 'ripe for his ministrations'. What else could that mean? He hadn't been surprised that Madame Delacroix might be involved in such a plot. But Professor Jackson? James had come to quite like the professor, despite his crusty exterior. He could hardly imagine that Jackson could be secretly plotting the domination of the Muggle world. Franklyn had to be wrong about him.

James ran lightly past the Americans' quarters, looking for the door to the guest room he and his dad were staying in. With a sudden stab of fear, he remembered that the doorway had vanished when he'd come out. It was a magical room, after all. How was he supposed to get back in? He had to be inside the room, apparently asleep, by the time his dad came back. He stopped in the corridor, not even sure what stretch of

"I'd tell him not to sweat it, but that'd be taking away his fun, wouldn't it?" Harry said, watching Ted depart. James grinned. They both began to fill their plates from the steaming platters along the table. As they began to eat, James was pleased to see Ralph and Zane enter. He waved them over enthusiastically.

"Hey, Dad, here're my friends, Zane and Ralph," James said as they piled onto the benches, one on either side. "Zane's the blond one, Ralph's the brick house."

"Pleased to meet you, Zane, Ralph," Harry said. "James tells me good things about both of you."

"I've read about you," Ralph said, staring at Harry. "Did you really do all that stuff?"

Harry laughed. "Straight shooter, isn't he?" he said, raising an eyebrow at James. "The major points, yes, those are probably true. Although if you'd've been there, it would have seemed a lot less heroic at the time. Mostly, me and my friends were just trying to keep ourselves from getting blasted, eaten, or cursed."

Zane seemed uncharacteristically quiet. "Hey, what's the deal?" James said, nudging him. "You're a little too new to all this to have an idol complex about the Great Harry Potter."

Zane grimaced, and then pulled a copy of the *Daily Prophet* from his backpack. "This stinks," he said, sighing and flopping the paper open onto the table, "but you're gonna see it sooner or later."

James leaned over and glanced at it. 'Hogwarts Anti-Auror Demonstration Overshadows International Summit', the main headline read. Below it, in smaller type: 'Potter Visit Sets Off School-wide Protest as Magical Community Re-evaluates Auror Policies'. James felt his cheeks flush red with anger. Before he could respond, however, his dad placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Hmm," Harry said mildly. "That's got Rita Skeeter's name all over it."

Zane frowned at Harry, then glanced at the paper again. "You can tell who wrote it just by the headline?"

"No," Harry laughed, dismissing the newspaper and digging into a slice of French toast. "Her name's on the byline. Still, yeah, that is pretty much her typical brand of tripe. It hardly matters. The world will forget it by this time next week."

James was reading the first paragraph, his brow furrowed furiously. "She says that most of the school was there, protesting and shouting. That's complete rubbish! I saw it, and if there were more than a hundred people there, I'll kiss a Blast-Ended Skrewt! Besides, most of them were just there to see what was going on! There were only fifteen or twenty people with the signs and the slogans!"

Harry sighed. "It's just a story, James. It isn't supposed to be accurate, it's supposed to sell papers."

"But how can you let them say things like this? It's dangerous! Professor Franklyn--"

James remembered to look for Zane among the Ravenclaws. His blond hair wasn't hard to find against the royal blue of his cloak. He spun through a knot of players, executing a surprisingly tight barrel roll, then leaned precariously and backhanded a Bludger as it banked around the group. The Bludger missed its target, but only because Noah ducked and rolled aside at just the right moment. The crowd roared in mingled delight and disappointment.

The heat of the summer evening was unusually fierce. The lowering sun beat down on players and spectators alike. On the ground, both teams had marked out team cool down areas, one at each end of the pitch. Each area held a dozen large buckets filled with water. Occasionally, a flyer would perform a wand signal, alerting the team's cool down crew. One member of the crew would use his wand to levitate the water out of one of the buckets, so that it floated thirty feet over the pitch like a solid, wobbling bubble. Then, just as the flyer swooped into position, another crew member would point his wand at the levitating ball of water, exploding it into a cloud of droplets just as the player flew through it. The crowd laughed delightedly every time a player emerged from the rainbow-laden mist, shaking water from their hair and joining the fray again, happily refreshed.

Gryffindor took the lead early on, but Ravenclaw began a steady comeback that stretched into the evening. The sun was setting by the time Ravenclaw overtook Gryffindor, and the match took on that feverish, hectic tone that only very close games can sustain. James watched the Seekers, trying to get a glimpse of the elusive Snitch, but he couldn't see any sign of the tiny golden ball. Then, just as he looked away, there was a flash of setting sunlight on something over the Hufflepuff grandstand. James squinted, and there it was, flitting in and out of the banner poles. The Ravenclaw team's Seeker had already seen it. James shouted to Noah, the Gryffindor Seeker, jumping to his feet and pointing. Noah spun around on his broom, looking wildly. He saw the Snitch just as it angled down, directly into the melee of circling flyers and careening Bludgers.

The Ravenclaw Seeker lunged as the Snitch streaked past him. He almost fell off his broom, turned the fall into a diving loop, and doubled back toward the match. Ted, one of Gryffindor's Beaters, aimed a Bludger at Ravenclaw's Seeker, making the boy duck and weave, but not deterring him from his course. Noah was approaching from the other side of the field, ducking and banking wildly through the other flyers. The rest of the crowd caught on to what was happening. As one, the spectators leaped to their feet, shouting and cheering. And then, just at the very height of the action, James saw something else that completely distracted him from the match for the first time since it had begun.

The Muggle intruder was down on the field, standing just to the side of the Ravenclaw cool down area. James could hardly believe he was seeing it, but the man was simply standing, wearing a cast-off cloak from one of the cool down crew, staring up into the match with an expression of total awe and bewilderment. He was holding something to his eye, and James recognized vaguely that it was some sort of handheld Muggle camera. He was filming the match! James tore his gaze away from the intruder and looked up at his dad, who stood next to him, shouting happily at the end-of-game brawl. James yanked Harry's robes and yelled up at him.

“But certainly, Mr. Potter, Mr. Hardcastle,” McGonagall said, looking at the adults, “you realize there is no conceivable way that anyone could overcome the protective perimeter of the school. Anyone you saw simply must have been permitted to be on the grounds, otherwise...”

“You’re right, Minerva,” Harry said. “But the individual I saw didn’t act as if he believed he was permitted to be here. So the question is, if he’s been allowed in, who gave the permission, and how? These are questions I’d very much like to ask, but our only hope of doing so rest on our beginning a search of the grounds immediately.”

McGonagall met Harry’s eyes, nodded reluctantly, then more certainly. “Of course. Who do you require?”

“I’d like Hagrid, for starters. No one knows these grounds like him, and of course, we’ll want Trife. We’d like to split into three teams: Hagrid with Trife, myself leading a team into the Forbidden Forest, and Titus heading the other team around the perimeter of the lake. We’ll need more sets of eyes to watch for sign. Too bad Neville is away tonight.”

“We could summon him back,” Hardcastle commented.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think that’s necessary. We’re looking for a single individual, possibly a Muggle. All we really need are a couple people who know how to spot a trail. How about Teddy Lupin and you, James?”

James tried not to look too pleased, but a thrill of pride went through him. He nodded at his dad with what he hoped looked like duty and confidence, instead of giddy excitement.

“Does the school keep any hippogriffs at the moment, Madam?” Titus rumbled. “A view from above is what’s called for here. If the man’s been on the grounds before, he must be camped out nearby.”

“No, none at the moment, Mr. Hardcastle. We have Thestrals, of course.”

Harry shook his head. “Too light. Thestrals can only carry one person, and none as heavy as Titus or myself. Hagrid would break one right in half.”

James was thinking hard. “How high do you have to be?”

Hardcastle looked sideways at James. “Higher than man-height’s really all that matters. High enough to get a bird’s-eye view of the ground, but slow enough to be able to study it. You’ve an idea? Spill it, son.”

“What about giants?” James said after a pause. He was worried it was a stupid idea. Mostly, he was afraid of losing the respect his dad had shown him by inviting him along on the search. “There’s Grawp, who’s tall as some trees, and his new lady friend. Hagrid says she’s even bigger than your regular giant.”

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

“Ahh, sheesh,” Zane moaned, following.

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

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

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

*When by the light of Sulva bright
I found the Grotto Keep;
Before the night of time requite
Did wake his languid sleep.
Upon return the fretted dawn
With not a relic lossing;
Bygone a life, a new eon,
The Hall of Elders’ Crossing.*

Something about the poem made James shudder.

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

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

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

Jackson maintained eye contact with the painting. “You still think about the numbers? You spend your time working out the books for the school budget as it stood in nineteen forty-nine?”

Yarrow’s eyes darted back and forth over the class. He seemed to feel he was being trapped somehow. “Er. Yes. Yes, I do. It’s just what I do, you understand. What I always did. I see no reason to stop. I’m the bursar, you see. Well, *was*, of course. The bursar.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Yarrow. You’ve illustrated my point precisely,” said Jackson, resuming his circuit of the room.

“Always happy to be of service,” Yarrow said a little stiffly.

Jackson addressed the class again. “Mr. Yarrow’s portrait, as some of you probably know, normally hangs in the corridor just outside the Headmistress’ office, along with many other former school staff members and faculty. We have, however, come into possession of a second portrait of Mr. Yarrow, one that normally hangs in his family’s home. The second portrait, as you may guess, is here in the center of our display. Mr. Yarrow, if you please?” Jackson gestured at the empty portrait in the center.

Yarrow raised his eyebrows. “Hm? Oh. Yes, of course.” He shifted, stood, brushed some nonexistent flecks of lint off his natty robes, and then stepped carefully out of the portrait frame. For a few seconds, both portraits stood empty, then Yarrow appeared in the center portrait. He was wearing slightly different clothes in this portrait, and when he sat, he was turned at an angle, showing the prow of his nose in profile.

“Thank you again, Mr. Yarrow,” Jackson said, leaning against his desk and crossing his arms. “Although there are exceptions, typically, a portrait only becomes active upon the death of the subject. Technomancy cannot explain to us why this should be, except that it seems to respond to the law of Conservation of Personalities. In other words, one Mr. Cornelius Yarrow at any given moment is, cosmically speaking, sufficient.” There was a murmur of suppressed laughter. Yarrow frowned as Jackson continued. “Another factor that comes into play once the subject is deceased is the interactivity between portraits. If there is more than one portrait of an individual, the portraits become connected, sharing a common subject. The result is one *mutual* portrait that can maneuver at will between its frames. For instance, Mr. Yarrow can visit us at Hogwarts, and then return to his home portrait as he wishes.”

James struggled to write all of Jackson’s comments down, knowing the professor was notorious for creating test questions out of the least detail of a lecture. He was distracted from the task, however, by thoughts of the portrait of Severus Snape. James risked raising his hand.

Jackson spied him and his eyebrows rose slightly. “A question, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, sir. Can a portrait ever leave its own frames? Can it, maybe, go over into a different painting?”

Jackson studied James for a moment, his eyebrows still raised. “Excellent question, Mr. Potter. Let us find out, shall we? Mr. Yarrow, may I beg your service once more?”

James resumed his walk to Charms class, musing idly about the wizard in the painting. He'd looked familiar, but James couldn't quite place him. By the time he entered Professor Flitwick's classroom, James had already forgotten the little painted wizard and his piercing stare.



The day of the much ballyhooed first school debate came and James was surprised at how many people were planning to attend. He had assumed debates were typically stodgy little affairs attended only by the teams themselves, some teachers, and a handful of the more academically-minded students. By lunch that Friday, though, the debate had generated the sort of boisterous tension that accompanied certain Quidditch matches. The one thing that seemed to be missing, however, was the joking taunts between the supporters. Thanks to the carefully worded banners and signs advertising the debate, the student population had been rather evenly divided between two worldviews that, it seemed, were not compatible on any level. The result was a sullen tension that filled the silences where jests and competitive taunts might otherwise have been. James had not been seriously considering attending the debate. Now, though, he realized that the outcome of the event would very likely affect the entire culture of Hogwarts. For that reason, he felt an obligation to go, as well as a growing curiosity. Besides, if Zane was going to be arguing in front of a large portion of the school populace, partly in defense of Harry Potter, James knew it'd be important that he be there to show his support.

After dinner, James joined Ted and the rest of the Gremlins as they made their way to the event, along with much of the rest of the student populace.

The debate was held in the Amphitheater, where the occasional play and concert were usually performed. James had never been in the Amphitheater before. The open-air seating area, carved out of the hillside behind the east tower, descended in steep terraces down to a large stage. As James made his way through the crowded arch that opened onto the top tier of seating, he saw that the stage below was nearly empty. A high-backed, official-looking chair sat in the center rear of the stage, flanked by two podiums and two long tables, with chairs arranged along their backs. Professor Flitwick was on stage, guiding a phosphorous globe into the air with his wand, placing it among several others that lit the stage at strategic locations. The orchestra pit had been covered over with a great wooden platform, and then arranged with a library table and six chairs. Zane had explained that the judges would sit there. The noise of the crowd of students was a hushed babble, nearly lost in the normal evening noises emanating from the dim hills and the

nearby forest. Ted, Sabrina, and Damien led the way into a row halfway up the middle section, joining a group of other Gryffindors. Noah was already there. He waved at James as they found their seats.

“Gremlin salute,” Noah said, performing, with a straight face, a complicated series of hand gestures that involved a traditional hand to the forehead salute, a raised fist, a waggle of both elbows that looked a bit like a chicken dance, and ended with both hands framing the sides of his face, pinky and thumbs extended, apparently mimicking Gremlin ears.

Ted nodded, responding with only the Gremlin-ear gesture, which was apparently the countersign. “Have our friends from triple W come through for us?”

Noah nodded. “We ran a small test this afternoon under controlled circumstances. Looks even better than we hoped. And,” he added, grinning, “they provided their services free of charge. George sent a note with the package, asking only that we tell him exactly how it turns out.”

Ted smiled rather humorlessly. “We’ll give him a full report either way.”

James nudged Ted. “What’s going on?”

“James, my boy,” Ted said, scanning the crowd, “do you know what the term ‘plausible deniability’ means?”

James shook his head. “No.”

“Ask your buddy, Zane. It was invented by the Americans. Let’s just say, sometimes, it’s best not to know anything until after the fact.”

James shrugged, figuring he was sitting close enough to the action to know, probably before anyone else, what the Gremlins were up to. Someone nearby had a small wireless tuned to the Wizarding Wireless Network. The tiny voice on the speaker burbled away, forming part of the background noise, until James heard the phrase ‘crowded Amphitheater’. He swept his gaze over the groups clustered near the stage, and then saw what he was looking for. A tall man wearing a purple bowler hat was speaking into the tip of his wand. The cadence of his speech blew small, smoky puffs off the end of his wand, the puffs forming the shapes of words as they floated through the air. On a small table near the man was a machine that looked somewhat like an old-fashioned record player with a huge funnel. The wispy word-shapes were sucked into the funnel as fast as they flowed off the man’s wand. James had never seen a magical broadcast in action. He read the words the wizard was speaking a second before they were broadcast to the nearby wireless.

“The curious and the contentious alike seem to have gathered in droves for tonight’s contest,” the announcer said, “illustrating the ongoing debate all around the wizarding world these days, as doubts about Ministry policy and Auror practices meet questions regarding recent magical history. Tonight, via this special broadcast of Current Wizard’s Newswatch, we will see what one of the country’s foremost centers of magical learning thinks of this divisive issue. I’m your host, Myron Madrigal, speaking on behalf of tonight’s sponsor,

Wymnot's Wand Polish and Enchant-Enhancer: better spells come from a Wymnot wand. We'll be right back for opening comments after this important message."

The announcer twirled a finger at an assistance, who plugged the funnel with a large plunger, then spindled a record into the device. A commercial for Wymnot Wand Polish began to play on the nearby wireless. James had been concerned about the debate being broadcast to the wizarding world at large, but then decided it was better than having it parsed and reported in bits by someone like Rita Skeeter. At least this way, all the arguments would be heard in their entirety. He could only hope that Zane, Petra, and their team would argue well against Tabitha Corsica and her carefully woven agenda of doubts and half-truths.

Just as the commercial on the nearby wireless ended, Benjamin Franklyn approached the left side podium on stage. On the wireless, the announcer's voice spoke in a hushed tone, "In a daring turn of events, the chancellor of the American wizarding school, Alma Aleron, Benjamin Amadeus Franklyn has been asked to officiate tonight's debate. He approaches the podium."

"Good evening, friends, students, guests," Franklyn said, forgoing his wand and raising his clear, tenor voice. "Welcome to this, Hogwarts' inaugural All-School Debate. My name is Benjamin Franklyn, and I am honored to have been chosen to introduce tonight's teams. Without further delay, will Teams A and B take their places on the stage?"

A group of ten people stood from the front row. The group split, half ascending the stage on the right side and half on the left. They filed into the chairs behind the two tables as Franklyn introduced them. Team A consisted of Zane, Petra, Gennifer Tellus, a Hufflepuff named Andrew Haubert, and an Alma Aleron student named Gerald Jones. Team B was, not surprisingly, mostly fifth- to seventh-year Slytherins, including Tabitha Corsica, her crony, Tom Squallus, and two others, Heather Flack and Nolan Beetlebrick. The fifth person at the table, and the only one younger than fifteen, was Ralph. He sat in his chair as rigid as a statue, staring at Franklyn as if he was hypnotized.

"Tonight's debate," Franklyn continued, adjusting his square spectacles, "as can be assumed by the turnout and the press coverage, deals with subjects both weighty and far-reaching. It has been said that dissent is the greatest expression of freedom, and that debate and discourse are the fuel for a right-thinking populace to maintain a fair government. These are the axioms that define us, and tonight, we will see them in action. Let us all assume an attitude of respect and reason, regardless of our own opinions, so that what flows tonight does so in a manner befitting this school and all who have passed through its halls. No matter the outcome," Franklyn turned at this point, acknowledging the two debate teams seated on either side, "let us leave here as we entered: friends, classmates, and fellow witches and wizards."

There was a round of applause which, James thought, sounded rather more perfunctory than appreciative. Franklyn produced a paper from his robes and examined it.

"As was determined earlier this evening by lots," he called out in an official voice, "Team B is first to offer opening statements. Miss Tabitha Corsica, I believe, will represent. Miss Corsica."

a team's argument, it seemed incumbent upon supporters of the opposing viewpoint to cheer their own side as well. Night descended on the Amphitheater, ominously dark, with only a thin sickle moon low on the horizon. Enchanted lanterns floated over the stairs and archways, leaving the seating areas in shadow. The stage glowed in the center, lit like noonday in the glow of Professor Flitwick's gently floating phosphorous globes. Zane faced off against Heather Flack, debating the assertion that recorded histories were always manufactured by the victors.

"I'm from the United States, you know," Zane said, addressing Heather Flack across the stage. "If your statement is true, it's a remarkable thing that I've ever learned anything about my country's occasionally terrible past, from our treatment of Native Americans, to the Salem witch-hunts, to the one-time institution of slavery. If the victors fabricate our histories, how is it that I know that even Thomas Jefferson once owned slaves?"

Benjamin Franklyn winced at that, then nodded slowly, approvingly. The supporters of Team A applauded uproariously.

Finally, with no clear outcome, the captains of both teams approached the podiums for final arguments. Tabitha Corsica still had first option.

"I appreciate," she began, glancing at Petra, "that my opponent in this debate has made it a point to restrict discussion to this one central tenet: that the recent history of the wizarding world has been enhanced and stylized to instill terror of some fabled, monstrous enemy. To be specific, they have continuously raised the image of 'the Dark Lord', as they prefer to call him. If Miss Morganstern wishes to evade the other valid facets of tonight's discussion, I will concur. If, that is, she is willing to debate the details of the one figure around whom all the other details revolve. Let us discuss the treatment of Lord Tom Riddle."

A distinct gasp of surprise and awe washed over the crowd at the mention of Voldemort's name. Even for Tabitha Corsica, James thought, bringing up Tom Riddle seemed like a terrible risk, even if he was, in fact, the heart of the issue. James sat forward in his seat, his heart pounding.

"'The Dark Lord', as the Auror Department likes to call Tom Riddle," Tabitha said into the hushed darkness, "was indeed a powerful wizard, and perhaps even a misguided one. Overzealous, he may have been. But what, really, do we know for sure about his plans and his methods? Miss Morganstern will simply tell you he was evil. He was a 'dark' wizard, she will say, intent only on power and death. But really, do such people even exist? In comic books, perhaps. And in the minds of those who breed fear. But is anyone, in reality, utterly and irredeemably evil? No, I suggest that perhaps Tom Riddle was a misguided but well-meaning wizard whose desire for Muggle-wizard equality was simply too radical a notion for the magical ruling class to allow. The powers-that-be put together a very careful campaign of half-truths and outright lies, all designed to discredit Riddle's ideas and demonize his followers, whom the Ministry-controlled media dubbed 'Death Eaters'. Despite this, Riddle's reformers were eventually able to win enough confidence to assume control of the Ministry of Magic for a short time. Only after a vicious and bloody coup were the old

“Well, let’s apologize later, OK?” Ralph said, working his way toward the archway with James following in his wake. “Right now, I just want to get out of here. Tabitha Corsica has been staring holes into me ever since I left the stage. Besides, Zane says that Ted’s invited us to hang out in your common room. He wants to gloat over having won over a member of Team B.”

“That won’t bother you?” James asked.

“Nah,” Ralph replied, shrugging, “it’s worth it. Gryffindors have better snacks.”

“This is a school, Mr. Potter, and a school is, in its simplest form, a place where young people gather. Young people are occasionally prone to have spat. This is why, among other reasons, Hogwarts employs Mr. Filch.”

“It wasn’t a spat, Madam,” Ralph said, following the Headmistress out into the corridor. “They were really mad. Daft mad, if you know what I mean. People are coming unglued about this whole business.”

“Then, like Mr. Potter says, it is fortunate Professor Longbottom was nearby. I fail to see, precisely, why this is your problem.”

Zane trotted to keep up with the Headmistress’ stride. “Well, the thing is, ma’am, we’re just wondering why you’re letting it all go on? I mean, you were there when the Battle took place. You know what this Voldemort guy was like. You could just tell everyone how it was and put Tabitha in her place, neat as you please.”

McGonagall stopped suddenly, leaving the boys to scramble to a halt near her. “What, may I ask, would you three wish me to do?” she said, dropping her voice and looking at each one intently. “The truth about the Dark Lord and his followers has been common knowledge for thirty years, ever since he murdered your grandparents, Mr. Potter. Do you suppose that my repeating it one more time will dispel all the revisionist rabble-rousing that has been going on, not only at this school, but throughout the wizarding world? Hmm?” Her eyes were like diamond chips as she glared at them. James realized that she was, if anything, even more agitated about the debate than they were. “And suppose I summon Miss Corsica to my office and forbid her from disseminating these lies and distortions. Do you expect that this ‘Progressive Element’ of theirs will simply give up? How long do you suppose it would be before we’d be reading an article in the *Daily Prophet* about how the administration of Hogwarts is working with the Auror Department to stifle the ‘free exchange of ideas on school grounds’?”

James was stunned. He had assumed that the Headmistress was indulging Tabitha Corsica for some reason, allowing, for a time, her charade to continue. It simply hadn’t occurred to him that McGonagall might not, in fact, be capable of addressing the matter without making it worse.

“So what do we do, ma’am?” James asked.

“We?” McGonagall said, raising her eyebrows. “My dear James, I admit that you amaze and impress me. Despite what you may believe, the future of the wizarding world does not, in fact, rest upon you and your two friends’ shoulders.” She saw the annoyed grimace on his face, and then she showed him one of her rare smiles. She bent a bit to speak more conspiratorially, addressing all three boys. “The revived memory of the Dark Lord is not an overlarge concern to those of us who once faced the living thing. This is a whim in the mind of a fickle populace, and irritating as it may be, it will pass. In the meantime, what you three can do is attend your classes, do your homework, and continue to be the sharp-witted and strong-hearted boys you obviously are. And if anyone around you tries to say Tom Riddle was a better man than Harry Potter, you have my permission--my instruction, even--to transfigure their pumpkin juice into nurgle water.” She eyed

"You both know I can't do magic once I'm off the train and officially out of Hogwarts," James said wearily. "I'll get in trouble."

"Dad's Head Auror, you git. You probably won't even get a warning."

"It's irresponsible," James said seriously. "You get older and you'll know what that means."

"You can't do it, can you?" Albus taunted. "James can't do a levitation! Some wizard you are. First Squib in the Potter family. Mum will die of shame."

"You're the same Albus-blabbus you ever were, you little skrewt."

"Don't call me that!"

"What, skrewt or Albus-blabbus?" James smiled. "You know Albus-blabbus is your real name, don't you? It's on your birth certificate. I saw it."

"Albus-blabbus!" Lily sang, dancing around her older brother.

Albus jumped on James, wrestling him to the floor.

Later, as James and Ralph headed to James' bedroom for the night, they passed a curtain that seemed to be drawn over a section of wall. A sleepy muttering came from behind it.

"Old Mrs. Black," James explained. "Crazy old nutter. Wigs out about people desecrating the house of her fathers and stuff every time she sees any of us. Dad and Neville have done everything they could think of to get the old bat off the wall, but she's stuck there right good. Even considered cutting out the section of wall with the portrait on it, but it's a main wall. Cutting her out would probably bring the next floor right down on top of us. Besides, strange as it may seem, Kreacher's rather attached to her, since she was his old mistress. So I suppose she's part of the family forever."

Ralph peeked tentatively behind the curtain. He furrowed his brow. "Is she... watching television?"

James shrugged. "We discovered that a few years back. We had the front door open because we were moving in a new sofa. She saw a telly through the window across the street and shut right up for the first time in weeks. So we hired a wizard artist to come and paint one right into her portrait. Crazy old bat loves the chat shows. Ever since then, well, she's been a lot more bearable."

Ralph slowly let the curtain drape back over the portrait. A man's voice behind it was saying, "And when did you first notice that your dog had Tourette's syndrome, Mrs. Drakemont?"

Kreacher had arranged a cot for Ralph in James' room. His trunk was placed neatly at the end of it, and there was a ribbon-wrapped pinecone on each pillow, apparently Kreacher's idea of a Christmas mint.

"This used to be my dad's godfather's room," James said sleepily, once they had settled down.

transporting a Christmas tree, which had looked merely charmingly plump outside, but had taken up two-thirds of the main hall when they'd brought it in.

"Seems a shame to do it," Bill said, producing his wand and pointing it at the tree. "*Reducio!*"

The tree shrunk by a third, but managed to maintain its density, so that it ended up looking rather more like a Christmas bush than a tree. Ralph, James, Rose, and Victoire spent most of the day before Christmas Eve stringing popcorn, decorating the tree, and wrapping presents. That night, Hermione gathered the entire household with the intention of bundling everyone up and going Christmas caroling. Neither Ron nor Harry, however, were particularly overjoyed about the idea.

"Give us a break, Hermione," Harry said, dropping into an easy chair by the fire. "We've been on our feet all day."

"Yeah," Ron chimed in, bolstered a bit, "it's just the start of the holiday. We haven't even had a chance to sit down yet, have we?"

"Ronald Weasley, you get your bottom into your coat and hat," Hermione replied, tossing Ron's things onto his lap. "We only get the whole family together once a year anymore, if we're lucky, and I'm not going to let you sit on your bum all night just as if you were at home. Besides," she added a bit truculently, "you said on the way here that you thought caroling sounded fun."

"That was before I knew you were serious," Ron muttered, climbing to his feet and shrugging on his coat.

"You too," Ginny smiled, grabbing Harry's hand and pulling him out of the chair. "You can lounge around all Christmas day if you wish. Tonight, we're going to have some fun, whether you like it or not."

Harry groaned, but allowed Ginny to work his coat onto him. She punched him playfully in the stomach and he grinned, grabbing his scarf. To Ron's and Harry's apparent annoyance, Bill was raring to go, performing scales in the hallway, his hand on his chest. Fleur, dressed as resplendently as her daughter, smiled adoringly at him. As they headed out the door, James heard Uncle Ron mutter to his dad, "I swear he acts like that as much to spite us as to impress her."

The night had turned out so perfectly and quintessentially Christmas-like that James wondered if his mum and Aunt Hermione had somehow bewitched it. Fat, silent snowflakes had begun to fall, muffling the distant city sounds and blanketing the grimy walls and sidewalks with sparkling white. Hermione passed out sheets of music, and then arranged everyone so that the youngest were in front and the oldest and tallest were in back. "If Mum weren't still around," Ron said to Harry in a low voice, "I'd swear Hermione was channeling her." During a practice chorus, Hermione became annoyed at Ted, who insisted on singing amusing variations of the lyrics, to the great delight of Albus and Hugo. Finally satisfied, she led the troupe through the streets surrounding Grimmauld Place, ringing doorbells and directing the choruses. Most of the Muggles who answered their doors stood and listened with something like strained amusement on their faces.

Once, an old man with a large hearing aid yelled at them that he didn't support any charities except the Hortense Home for Feral Felines, and then slammed his door.

"McGonagall owes him a Christmas card, then," Ted said, barely missing a beat.

James waved a hand at Ralph before he could ask. "Animagus. I'll explain later."

Christmas morning dawned with dazzling brightness, the sun turning the snow-frosted windows into blinding tableaux. Ralph and James met Albus and Rose on their way down the steps to breakfast.

"It's no use," Rose said dolefully. "Mum swears she'll *Crucio* anyone who tries to open a present before breakfast."

James blinked. "Aunt Hermione said that?"

"Well," answered Albus, "not in so many words. But she's really in a snit ever since she caught us using a pair of Uncle George's z-ray spectacles on the presents to see what was in them. She just about turned Dementor on him. It was scary!"

"Uncle George is here?" James asked, trotting down the rest of the stairs and heading for the kitchen. "Excellent!"

"Yeah, but he brought Katie Bell with him," Albus said, pronouncing the name with his most ingratiatingly snarky voice. Albus didn't so much disapprove of Katie Bell as he disapproved of anyone threatening to alter George Weasley's impish bachelorhood.

As James and Ralph turned the corner into the old kitchen, they heard George's voice saying, "That's the sort of publicity that has allowed triple W to grow to two locations and become the wizarding world's leading joke shop, you know. You can't turn down a primo showstopper at a broadcast event like the debate. It's all about the spectacle."

Katie Bell, an attractive woman with long brown hair, stirred her tea. "You should've heard the way Myron Madrigal described it on the wireless," she said, stifling a smile.

Ted scowled, then his curiosity got the better of him. "What'd he say?"

"He called it 'a puerile display of monumental poor taste'," George said proudly, raising his juice glass in a toast.

"That's beautiful!" Ted grinned, clinking his glass to George's.

"James, good to see you!" George said, clapping his juice onto the table and patting the seat next to him. "Have a seat and tell us how the old alma mater is treating you."

"Great," James said, sitting down and grabbing a piece of toast. "George, this is my friend, Ralph."

“Remember what I told you about the night I hid under the Invisibility Cloak and followed Dad and Professor Franklyn around? Franklyn told Dad that he should keep an eye on Professor Jackson. He said that Jackson was involved in the whole anti-Auror propaganda movement. Don’t you see?”

Ralph frowned again, thinking hard. “I don’t know. I can’t believe Professor Jackson would be part of a plot to start a war against the Muggles. He’s hardcore, but he seems cool.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but Ralph, you know what I think that thing in his case was? I think it was one of the relics! I think it was Merlin’s robe! He’s keeping it safe until he can get the rest of the relics together.”

Ralph’s eyes widened. “No!” he said in a low whisper. “Can’t be! I mean, Professor Jackson...!”

“That’s not all,” James said, digging into his backpack. “Take a look at this.” He pulled out the folded *Daily Prophet* that Zane had given him, the one with the cover story about the demonstration against Harry Potter’s visit. “It’s been in the bottom of my bag this whole time. I’d forgotten why I even kept it, but take a look at the article on the back.” James tapped the article about the break-in at the Ministry of Magic and the strangely cursed thieves who had apparently not gotten around to stealing anything. Ralph read it slowly, then looked up at James, his eyes large.

“It says one of the places they broke into was the Department of Mysteries,” he said. “You think these guys were looking for the Merlin throne?”

“Maybe,” James admitted, thinking hard. “But I don’t think so. I think they were hired as a diversion. It says none of them had much of a prior record, right? They couldn’t have broken into the Ministry on their own. I think maybe they were just a distraction, riffling things around and playing a bit of havoc while someone *else* found the throne and got it out of there.”

“But it says here nothing was stolen,” Ralph said, glancing back at the article.

“Well, they wouldn’t admit that the throne of Merlin had been taken, would they?” James replied. “I mean, that’d be a pretty scary bit of dark magic to admit had gone missing, what with all the stories of evil wizards trying to use the relics to bring back Merlin all these centuries past. Then again,” he thought back to what Luna had told them, “if it had been stored in the vaults of the Department of Mysteries since the sixteen hundreds, maybe they didn’t even know it was there anymore. How would they know if one item had gone missing from the place? Luna called them the ‘endless vaults’, didn’t she?”

“So,” Ralph said, still scanning the news article, “somebody hires these three goons to break in and make a mess of things, while the real thieves make off with the throne of Merlin. Then the real thieves curse these guys not to be able to talk, and set them up to take the fall. Right? Pretty sneaky. But still, where do you hide something like Merlin’s throne? Don’t powerful magical objects, especially dark ones, make a pretty noticeable imprint? I mean, your dad and his Aurors would’ve picked up on it somehow, wouldn’t they?”

“That stinks,” Ralph said flatly. “I was really starting to like Professor Jackson. But still, what’s the big deal, really? I mean, Luna said that it’s impossible to bring Merlin back. She pretty much made it sound like anyone who thinks they can do it is right loony. Once dead, always dead. Why not let Delacroix and Jackson have their fantasies?”

James couldn’t let it go. He shook his head. “I don’t know about Delacroix, but Professor Jackson’s smarter than that. He teaches Technomancy, doesn’t he? He wouldn’t fall for some crackpot scheme if he didn’t think it’d work. Besides, everybody keeps talking about it as if Merlin had died. But Austramaddux doesn’t say he died, does he? He just left the world of men.”

Ralph shrugged. “Whatever. Seems pretty dodgy to me.” He flopped backwards onto the cot.

“Come on, Ralph!” James said, tossing the old newspaper onto him. “They’re trying to bring Merlin back so they can start a war with the Muggles! It’s up to us to stop it!”

Ralph rolled onto his side and furrowed his brow at James. “What do you mean? Your dad’s Head Auror. If you’re really worried about it, tell him about it. It’s his job to stop things like this, isn’t it? What’re we going to do, anyway?”

James was exasperated. “We can try to stop them! Nobody will believe us if we tell them now. We can try to capture the relics ourselves. If we do that, then we’ll at least have proof!”

Ralph continued to stare at James. After a minute he spoke. “Don’t you think you might be making a bit much of this? I mean, I understand wanting to follow in your dad’s footsteps and all, trying to save the world and be the hero...”

“Shut up, Ralph,” James said, suddenly angry. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ralph rolled onto his back. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.” James knew that, after their earlier fight, Ralph was sensitive not to say anything too argumentative.

“All right,” James admitted, “I know why you’re saying that. But this is different. I’m really not just trying to be like Dad, all right? Maybe there isn’t any way to bring back Merlin. But still, these Progressive Element types are up to no good. If we can prove that they’re trying to start a war, we can at least shut them down, can’t we? If we can do that, I think we should. Are you with me?”

Ralph grinned at James. “Of course. What’s the fun of being a wizard if we aren’t on a quest to save the world?”

James rolled his eyes. “Shut up and go to sleep, Ralphinator.”

But James couldn’t sleep, not for a long time. He thought and thought about everything he’d learned that night, the connections he and Ralph had made. It made too much sense. It had to be true. And as much as he trusted Luna, he couldn’t quite accept that it would be impossible to bring Merlin into the

what it was. At first glance, it was merely an old parchment, folded many times. Like a map. James considered it. What finally decided him was the thought of what Ted Lupin might say if he knew that James had turned down such a golden opportunity.

James grabbed the Marauder's Map, clutching it and the Invisibility Cloak to his chest, then carefully closed his dad's trunk. He ran down the steps and back into his bedroom. By the time he'd hidden his contraband in the bottom of his own trunk, he was feeling both excited and frightened in equal measures. There was sure to be a row when he was found out, and there was no question that he *would* be found out. Still, he knew that his dad wouldn't be able to deny that he himself would have done the same thing if he'd been in James' shoes. He was counting on that to temper things when the time came. Until then, he'd put both items to great use. He didn't know exactly how, yet, but there was no question that, with the Invisibility Cloak *and* the Marauder's Map in his possession, he felt much better equipped to tackle whatever adventures were sure to come.



The return trip to school was, like all post-holiday journeys, melancholy and quiet. Back at Hogwarts the next week, James and Ralph relayed to Zane everything Luna had told them and the connections they had subsequently made. James was gratified that Zane immediately grasped the implications.

"Maybe Madame Delacroix's put the Imperius Curse on Jackson?" he asked in a low tone as the three boys huddled around a table in the corner of the library.

"Yeah," Ralph agreed. "That'd make sense. She could just be using him as a tool."

James shook his head. "Dad says the Imperius Curse is pretty easy to cast, but it takes a lot of willpower to maintain it over a long period of time. The whole school year is a *long* time. Also, a strong enough wizard can learn to throw it off or resist it altogether. Jackson's too sharp to be an easy target for something like that."

Ralph shrugged, and then leaned in, lowering his voice as a group of students walked past. "Either way, I still think the whole thing's a wash. I mean, wizards have been trying to get Merlin back for centuries, haven't they? And the best wizards alive today believe that the whole thing is just a sort of fairy tale. Professor Franklyn said in D.A.D.A. that the best records show that Merlin ended up getting involved with

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

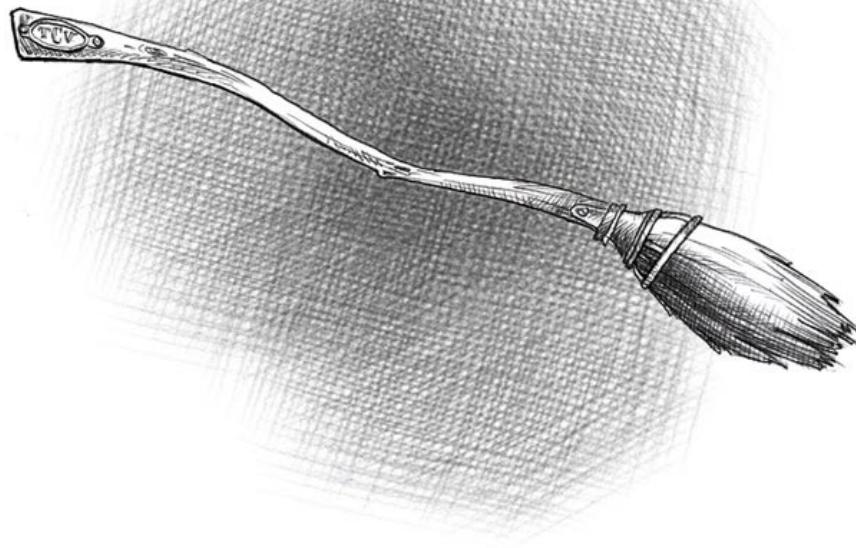
James stuffed Jackson’s briefcase under his robe, clutching it under his arm, and the two boys ran to find Ralph, stopping only long enough to collect the Invisibility Cloak from the floor of the empty Technomancy classroom.

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

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

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

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



13. REVELATION OF THE ROBE

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

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

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

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

"Can't be that much of a lock if it popped open that day in D.A.D.A.," James reasoned.

Ralph stood back, giving James room. "Let's get it over with then. Try and open it."

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

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

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

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

Zane's voice was low and slightly hoarse. "Is that it? I can't tell what it is."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

James sputtered, "He knows? Already?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ralph suddenly dropped to one knee, flinging his backpack onto the floor in front of him. He unzipped it quickly and dug inside, almost frantically, as if worried that whatever inspiration had struck him would flee before he could confirm it. He finally produced a book, gripped it triumphantly, and stood up again, riffling toward the back. Zane and James crowded behind him, trying to see over Ralph's broad shoulders. James recognized the book. It was the antique potions book his mum and dad had given Ralph for Christmas. As Ralph flipped through the pages, James could see the notes and formulae that crowded the margins, crammed alongside doodled drawings and diagrams. Suddenly, Ralph stopped flipping. He held the book open with both hands and slowly raised it so that it was level to the observant servant in the background of the painting. James gasped.

"It's the same dude!" Zane said, pointing.

Sure enough, there, in the right-hand margin of one of the last pages of the potions book, was an old pencil sketch of the observant servant. It was unmistakably the same figure, right down to the hook nose and the sullen, stooped pose. The painted version recoiled from the book slightly, and then crossed the hall as swiftly as it could without actually running. It stopped behind one of the pillars lining the opposite side of the painted hall. The knights at the table ignored it. James, watching intently, narrowed his eyes.

"I knew it looked familiar," Ralph said triumphantly. "He was in a different position when we first came across him, so I didn't place it straight off. Just now, though, he was in exactly the same pose as the drawing in this book. Now, *that* is weird."

"Can I see?" James asked. Ralph shrugged and handed the book to James. James bent over it, flipping back to the front of the book. The margins in the first hundred pages were filled mostly with notes and spells, many with sections scribbled out and rewritten in a different color, as if the writer of the notes was refining his work. By the middle of the book, though, drawings and doodles began to crowd in with the notes. They were sketchy, but quite good. James recognized many of them. Here was a rough sketch of the woman in the background of the painting of the king's court. A few pages later he found two quite detailed drawings of the fat wizard with the bald head from the painting of the poisoning of Peracles. Again and again, he recognized the sketches as the characters in the paintings all over Hogwarts, the secondary figures who'd been watching James and his friends with avid, unconcealed interest.

"Amazing," James said in a low, awed voice. "All these drawings are from paintings all over the school, you see?"

Ralph squinted at the drawings in the book, then back at the painting again. He shrugged. "It's weird, but not all that amazing, is it? I mean, the guy who owned this book was probably also a student here, right? Sounds like he was a Slytherin, like me. That's why your dad gave me the book. So whoever he was, he liked art. Lots of art lovers sketch from paintings. Big deal."

Zane's brow furrowed as he looked back and forth between the drawing of the observant servant and his painted equivalent, who was still skulking near the pillars in the background. "No, these aren't just sketches," he said, shaking his head slowly. "These are the originals, or so close it's impossible to tell the

difference. Don't ask me how I know. I just know. Whoever sketched these drawings was either a master forger... or he was the actual artist."

Ralph thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head. "That doesn't even begin to make sense. These paintings were painted at lots of different times. No way one bloke was responsible for all of them. Besides, a lot of these paintings are old. Way older than this book."

"It makes *perfect* sense," James said, clapping the potions book shut and looking down at the cover. "Whoever painted these didn't paint the whole paintings. Think about it: not a single one of these sketched characters is of a dominant person in any of the paintings. Every one of them is a drawing of some totally unimportant background character. Whoever drew these just *added* the characters into existing paintings."

Zane cinched up the corner of his mouth and furrowed his brow. "Why would anyone do that? It's like graffiti, but nobody would notice it except the guy who painted it. What's the fun in that?"

James was also thinking hard. He nodded slightly to himself, looking down at the old book in his hands again. "I think I have an idea," he said, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "We'll find out for sure. Tonight."



"Come on, Ralph!" James complained in a harsh whisper. "Quit tugging! You're yanking it up. You can see my feet!"

"I can't help it," Ralph moaned, crouching down as far as he could. "I know you said your dad and his mates used to do this all the time, but one of *them* was a girl, remember?"

"Yeah, and she didn't eat seven meals a day, either," Zane said.

The three of them shuffled down the darkened corridor, crammed under the Invisibility Cloak. They'd met at the base of the staircases, and apart from one tense moment when Steven Metzker, the Gryffindor prefect and brother of Noah, had passed them in the hall singing slightly off key, they had encountered no one. When they reached the intersection near the statue of the one-eyed witch, James directed them to stop. The three of them maneuvered clumsily into a corner and James opened the Marauder's Map.

Snape nodded, the sneer creeping back into his face. “Does it? Perhaps you haven’t learned anything after all, then.” Snape sighed, and he seemed genuinely disappointed. “What did you come to ask, Potter? I see you are determined in your course regardless of what I say, so let’s get this over with.”

James felt small in front of the portrait of the former headmaster. Zane and Ralph stood further back, and James knew it was his question to ask. This was his battle more than it was theirs. His battle against the Merlin conspiracy, yes, but more importantly, his battle against himself and the shadow of his father.

He raised his eyes to Snape’s black gaze. “If we can’t get the Merlin staff, I need to go to the Hall of Elder’s Crossing. I need to stop them there, before they can hide the staff and the throne forever.”

James heard the movement of Zane and Ralph behind him. He turned back to them. “I won’t ask you two to come, but I’m committed. I have to try to stop them.”

Snape sighed hugely. “Potter, you really are just as foolish and preposterously self-absorbed as your father. Turn the robe over. Give it to your father or the Headmistress. They will know what to do. I will advise them. You cannot possibly hope to manage this on your own. You’ve impressed me once. Do try and accomplish that again.”

“No,” James said with conviction. “If I tell them, Jackson and Delacroix and whoever else will get away. You know it just like I do. Then two of the relics will be lost forever.”

“Without all three together, the power of the relics is broken.”

“But not destroyed,” James insisted. “They are still powerful on their own. We can’t let them be used by those who’d try to continue Voldemort’s work. We can’t risk them falling into the hands of Voldemort’s heir.”

Snape scowled. “*If* such a person exists.”

“That’s not a risk worth taking,” James countered. “Where is the Hall of Elder’s Crossing?”

“You do not know what you’re asking, Potter,” Snape said dismissively.

“We’ll find out somehow, James,” Zane said, stepping forward again. “We don’t need this old pile of paint to tell us. We’ve worked everything out so far. We’ll figure this out, too.”

“You’ve survived on suspicious good fortune and the interference of myself alone,” Snape growled. “Do not forget your place, boy.”

“It’s true,” Ralph said. James and Zane turned to look at him, surprised to hear him speak. Ralph swallowed and went on, “We *have* done pretty well so far. I don’t really know who you are, Mr. Snape, but as grateful as we are for you helping us when James put on the robe, I think James is right. We need to try to stop them and get the rest of the relics. You were a Slytherin, and you said that the things they say about

it very carefully. Despite Mr. Prescott's obvious Muggle nature, this made him a sort of haphazard Secret-Keeper. He can, if he so wishes, share the secret of this school's location with anyone else he wishes. Whether they are able to get past the school's unplottability zone is another question, though. Not everyone is quite as persistent as he is. This might explain why he needs our help to bring in his entourage."

"We cannot allow such a thing to happen, of course," Neville said, looking to the Headmistress.

"I'm not entirely certain we can prevent it," she said heavily. "Our Mr. Prescott is indeed an extremely tenacious individual. He knows enough already to do us great harm. Even if we were to discover the whereabouts of his crew, Oblivate them all and send them back, they would discover the recording that has been made of all Mr. Prescott has seen so far. He would inevitably return, and perhaps next time, it will occur to him to bring live cameras rather than just a telephone. I see no recourse but to allow him to go on with this investigation of his and hope to talk him out of broadcasting it."

Neville shook his head. "I have more confidence that we could talk the merpeople out of living in the lake than that we could convince this sodding twit not to broadcast his prize story."

Franklyn adjusted his tiny glasses and looked at the ceiling. "Of course, there are more, er, *wholesale* methods of dealing with this kind of thing, Madam Headmistress. We could simply place the Imperius Curse upon Mr. Prescott. That way we could arrange for him to send his crew away and even accompany him back to his offices to help him destroy any record of this visit. Once that was accomplished, we could feel free to Oblivate Mr. Prescott with no fear of a repeat performance."

McGonagall sighed. "This is not the sort of decision we are exactly authorized to make, and frankly, I am glad of that. The Ministry of Magic has been notified of the situation and I am assured they will instruct us on the proper course within the hour. I expect to hear from your father directly, Mr. Potter, and at any moment."

As if on cue, a woman's voice spoke up from the fireplace. "Greetings and salutations. This is an official communication of the Ministry of Magic. Can we be assured that this is a secure assembly?"

McGonagall stood and moved around her desk to face the fireplace. "It is. These with me are the only persons on the grounds at present fully aware of what is happening, although by this point, the whole of the school must know that we have a Muggle individual among us. His entry was hardly subtle."

The face in the banked coals of the Headmistress' fireplace looked around at Neville, James, and Professor Franklyn. "I am the undersecretary of Miss Brenda Sacarhina, Co-Chair of the Council of Ambassadorial Relations. Please stand by to be connected." The face vanished.

James saw McGonagall's face tighten just the tiniest bit when the undersecretary mentioned Miss Sacarhina. Only a few seconds passed before the face of the prim woman appeared in the fireplace. "Madam McGonagall, Professors Franklyn and Longbottom, greetings. And young Mr. Potter, of course." An ingratiating smile appeared on Sacarhina's lips when she spoke to James. The smile disappeared almost as

“It’s all clear. We should be safe in here, now that Ridcully’s been and gone. He’s the only one that uses the shed.”

Ralph climbed the steps and looked cautiously around. James remembered that Ralph hadn’t been along the night he and the Gremlins had used this secret tunnel to go raise the Wocket. “It’s a magic tunnel. It only works one way,” he whispered to Ralph. “We can get back through it because it’s the way we came, but anybody else would just find the inside of the equipment shed.”

“Cool,” Ralph breathed meaningfully. “That’s good to know.”

James, Ralph, and Sabrina pressed against the rear of the shed to peer through the single, grimy window. The Quidditch pitch lay behind the shed, and they could clearly see three of the grandstands, already mostly filled with banner-waving students and teachers, all bundled against the unseasonable chill. The Ravenclaw and Slytherin teams were gathering along opposite sides of the pitch to observe their captains shaking hands and listen to Ridcully’s traditional recital of the basic rules of play.

“I forgot all about this,” Sabrina said quietly. “The whole handshaking thing. That Zane is a pretty sharp fellow.”

James nodded. It had been Zane’s idea to stage the broom caper during the opening moments of the match, in those few minutes when both teams came out of their holding pens beneath the grandstands to watch the opening ritual. It was a genius idea, because it was the only time when the teams’ brooms were separated from their owners, left behind in the holding pens until the teams collected them for their big flying introductions.

“It’s time,” Ted said, tapping James once on the shoulder. “There’s Corsica already.”

James swallowed past a lump in his throat that felt like a marble. His heart was already pounding. He pulled the Invisibility Cloak out of his backpack, shook it open and threw it over his and Ralph’s heads. As they neared the door of the shed, Petra whispered harshly, “I can see your feet. Ralph, duck down some more.” Ralph hunkered and James saw the edge of the cloak meet the ground around his feet.

“Stay low and move fast,” Ted instructed. He turned and peered between the planks of the door. The equipment shed was positioned at a corner of the pitch, just inside the magical boundary erected by the match official. The door faced away from the pitch, visible only to the Slytherin grandstands right next to it.

“Looks clear enough,” Ted said, his face pressed to the cracks in the door. “Let’s just hope everybody’s looking at the pitch and not this shed.” With that, he pushed the door open and stepped aside. James and Ralph shuffled through and James heard the door clunk shut behind them.

The wind was shifty and unpredictable. It barreled across the pitch and swatted restlessly at the Invisibility Cloak, flapping it about the boys’ legs.

“Somebody’s going to see my feet,” Ralph moaned.

course. It banked and dove down a flight of stone stairs into the elf kitchens. Unlike the rest of the school, the kitchens were crowded and bustling, filled with elves cleaning up after the evening meal. The broom darted between gigantic pots, forcing the elves to scramble like tenpins. There was a cacophony of crashing dishes and silverware, the noise of which fell away with horrible speed. The washrooms were next, stifling hot and noisy. The broom rocketed wildly through the machinery of the washers, diving through gigantic cogwheels and under the arms of enormous, chugging pistons. James was horrified to see that the broom, apparently having reached a dead end, was barreling straight toward the stone wall at the end of the room. He was about to throw himself off the broom, hoping to land in one of the copper vats of suds and water, when the broom ticked slightly to the left and angled up. There was a door set into the wall, and James recognized that it was a laundry chute. He gritted his teeth and hugged the broomstick again. The broom shot into the chute, angling upwards so hard that James could barely keep his legs tucked in, and then there was only rushing darkness and pressure.

A pile of laundry met him halfway up the chute and James spluttered as the mass of cloth smothered him. He struggled to shake the clothes free, but couldn't risk letting go of the broomstick. The broom ducked again, and James could tell by the change in pressure and the coolness of the air that it had somehow taken him back outside again. All he could see through the mass of cloth was a faint pattern of flickering light as the broomstick banked and dove. James risked letting go with one hand. He flailed at the clothing wrapped around him, finally grabbing a handful and yanking it as hard as he could. The cloth came free, stunning him with a blurring tableau of light and wind. He had time only to recognize that somehow, incredibly, the broom was taking him back to the Quidditch pitch. The grandstands loomed ahead of him. At the base of the nearest one was a throng of people, many turning toward him, pointing and yelling. Then, with instant finality, the broomstick simply stopped moving. James shot off the end of the broom, and for what seemed like far too long a time, he simply hurtled through the air unsupported. Finally, the ground claimed him with a long, rolling thud. Something in James' left arm popped unpleasantly and when he finally came to a stop, he found himself staring up into a dozen random faces.

"Looks like he'll be all right," one of them said, looking from him to someone standing nearby.

"More than he deserves," another person said angrily, frowning down at him. "Trying to ruin the match by stealing the team captain's broomstick. I never would have thought it."

"It's quite all right, really," another voice said from further off. James moaned and pushed himself up on his left elbow. His right arm was throbbing horribly. Tabitha Corsica stood twenty feet away, surrounded by a crowd of awed spectators. Her broom hung motionless next to her, exactly where it had stopped. She had one hand on it, gripping it easily. "We can surely forgive this kind of first-year enthusiasm, although I myself am rather amazed at the lengths some will go to in the name of Quidditch. Really, James. It's just a game." She smiled at him, showing him all her teeth.

James flopped back into the grass, clutching his right arm next to him. The crowd began to break apart as Ridcully appeared, pushing his way through. The Headmistress and Professors Franklyn and Jackson were right behind him. James heard Tabitha Corsica talking loudly to her teammates as she headed back

“Sorry, Madam,” James said, holding up the rubber duck. “It wasn’t me. It was my duck.”

“I see,” she said with obvious disapproval. “Perhaps now would be a good time for me to retire for the evening. You won’t be, er, needing anything, will you?”

James shook his head. “No, Madam. Thanks. My arm feels loads better, anyway.”

“Don’t fiddle with it, like I said, and you’ll be fine by morning, I expect.” She stood and hurried past James toward the leaded-glass doors. Two figures could be seen through the milky glass, and James knew that they were Philia Goyle and Kevin Murdock, both kindly sent by Professor Jackson to watch the doors. Madam Curio unlocked the doors and went out, offering her good-evenings to the sentries. The door clicked shut behind her and James heard the bolt clack into place. He sighed in frustration, and then jumped as his rubber duck quacked a loud insult next to him. He raised it and looked at the bottom. Below his handwriting was a new line of black letters: *open the window: ten minutes.*

James felt a little better. He hadn’t been sure that either Ralph or Zane would be in any position to hear or respond to their ducks. In fact, he’d had no word whatsoever about what had happened to the rest of the Gremlins. He felt cautiously confident that none had been caught, although Ralph’s predicament, left in the middle of the Slytherin holding pens, was probably worse than anyone else’s. Despite that, he figured that even Ralph had gotten out all right. Once everyone had seen James explode out of the holding pen riding Tabitha’s broom, attention had probably focused on his wild ride, and then Tabitha’s summoning of her broomstick, bringing both it and James back to the pitch. Most likely, Ralph had slipped out at that point and returned to the shed, along with the Gremlins.

James watched the clock over Madam Curio’s desk as the minutes ticked away. He struggled with the impulse to go and open the window before the ten minutes had passed. If Madam Curio came back and saw him standing by an open window, she’d suspect treachery even though the window was at least thirty feet above the ground. Finally, as the minute hand ticked into place, announcing eight fifteen, James jumped off the bed. He grabbed the letter from the bedside table and ran lightly toward the far right window. The latch turned easily and James opened the window onto cool, misty night. The sky had finally cleared, revealing a dusting of silvery stars, but there was no sign of Nobby. James leaned over the sill, looking along the ledge, and a monstrous silent shape loomed out of the darkness toward him, blotting out the stars. It fell over him heavily, surrounded him, and yanked him bodily out the window before he had time to shout for help.

The figure squeezed him so that James’ breath whooshed out of him. Far below, a voice called in a loud stage whisper, “Not so hard! You’ll grind his bones, already!” James was amazed to recognize Zane’s voice. The gigantic hand loosened a bit and James saw yards of female giant going past as he was lowered toward the ground.

“Nicely done, Prechka!” Zane called, patting the giant on her shin. She grunted happily and opened her hand, unrolling James onto the ground between her massive feet.

“I thought you were just bringing Nobby!” James gasped, clambering up.

"It was Ted's idea," Ralph said, moving out of the shadow of a nearby shrubbery. "He knew you'd want to get out and see to this whole Merlin affair, especially now. He went off to find Grawp the moment you were taken off by Jackson. Grawp found Prechka, who's tall enough to reach the hospital wing, and we were just trying to figure out how to get you to the window when you ducked at us. Worked out pretty neatly, we thought."

"I'll say," James said, rubbing his ribs with the heel of his left palm. "Good thing she's left-handed or I'd probably need a whole new dose of Skele-Gro for my arm. She's got a *grip*! So where is Ted, anyway?"

"House arrest, along with the rest of the Gremlins," Zane said, shrugging. "McGonagall knew they were involved in the broomstick thieving plot, even if she can't prove it yet. She probably would have let it slide--she has bigger frogs to dissect with Recreant and Sacarhina here--but Jackson's idea was to have all the Gremlins out of the way until tomorrow, when the whole thing with this Prescott dude was taken care of. Ted was sent off to the Gryffindor common room the moment he got back from the forest with Grawp. Everybody's there except Sabrina, who took a pretty ugly Gigantism Curse from Corsica. Her nose is the size of a soccerball. Nothing for it but to sleep it off, apparently. I think we'd have been under guard, too, except that Jackson thinks Ralph's too dim to be involved in the broomstick plot and I had the perfect alibi, being right there on the field the whole time. So here we are. What's the plan, James?"

James glanced from Zane to Ralph to Prechka, and then took a deep breath. "Same as before. We need to get out to the Grotto Keep to stop Jackson, Delacroix, and whoever else is involved. We still need to capture the Merlin staff, if we can, and most importantly, we need to escape so we can testify about whoever is involved."

"Hear, hear," Ralph agreed.

"But first," James said, holding up the letter he'd written to his dad, "I need to send this. I should've sent it weeks ago, but better late than never. Ted was right. We need help. If we hadn't asked the Gremlins to help us, I'd still be stuck up there in the hospital wing."

"If we hadn't asked the Gremlins to help us, you might not have gotten thrown in there in the first place," Ralph muttered, but without much feeling.

"Zane," James said, turning toward him and stuffing the letter into his pocket, "what time is the alignment supposed to happen?"

"Nine fifty-five," Zane answered. "We've only got an hour and a half."

James nodded. "Meet me at the edge of the forest near the lake in fifteen minutes. Bring Prechka if she'll come."

Zane looked up the dark bulk of the giantess. "I don't think we could get rid of her if we wanted to. She seems to like helping."

"I was savoring de moment, Theodore. It's been a long time coming. I'd be tempted to say 'too long', if I was a believer in chance. I am not, of course. This is how it was meant to be. I have done what I was meant to do. Even you have performed the role you were preordained to perform."

"Do you really believe so, Madame?" Jackson asked, stopping several feet behind Delacroix. James noticed that Jackson had his hickory wand in his hand. "I wonder. I, as you know, am neither a believer in chance nor destiny. I am a believer in choices."

"It matters not what you believe, Theodore, as long as your choices lead to the right ends."

"I have the robe," Jackson said flatly, abandoning the pretense of polite conversation. "I have always had it. You will not get it from me. I am here to see to that. I am here to stop you, Madame, despite your best efforts to keep me away."

James almost gasped. He covered his mouth with his hand, stifling it. Jackson was here to stop her! But how? James felt a cold dread dawning on him. Next to him, Ralph whispered almost silently, "Did he say..."

"Shh!" Zane hissed urgently. "Listen!"

Delacroix was making a strange, rhythmic sound. Her shoulders shook slightly with it, and James realized she was laughing. "My dear, dear Theodore, I have never attempted to thwart you. Why, if I had not allowed a token resistance to your presence on dis trip, you'd have never chosen to come at all. Your stubbornness and suspicious nature are my best tools. And I needed you, Professor. I needed what you had, what you believed so ardently dat you were protecting."

Jackson stiffened. "Do you believe I was foolish enough to bring the robe with me tonight? Then you are more arrogant than I thought. No, the robe is safe. It is secured with the best hexes and counter-*Accio* charms ever created. I know that, for they were created by me. You shall not find it, of that I am certain."

But Delacroix was laughing harder. She still hadn't turned around. The beam of light illuminating the chair seemed to be growing brighter, and James realized it was the accumulated light of the planets. They were moving into place. The time of the Hall of Elders' Crossing was nearly upon them.

"Oh, Professor, your confidence cheers me. With enemies such as yourself, my success is all the more delicious. Do you think I haven't known all along dat you guarded the robe of Merlinus in your case at all times? Do you think I was not preparing for de robe to be delivered to me from the moment I first arrived here? I haven't had to lift so much as a finger, and yet de robe comes to me of its own accord dis very night."

James had a horrible thought. He remembered that day in Defense Against the Dark Arts, when Jackson had followed Professor Franklyn into the classroom, speaking in low tones. Madame Delacroix had come to the door to tell Jackson his class was waiting. James had glanced down at that moment, and the case had mysteriously come open. Was it possible that Madame Delacroix had caused that to happen, just so that

Jackson had turned when Zane came forward, watching with a noticeable lack of surprise, his wand still out, but pointed at the floor. Now he looked on as James and Ralph stood jerkily, as if against their will, and began to march down the steps toward the center of the grotto. His eyes met James', his bushy dark brows low and furious. "Stop, Potter," he said quietly, raising his wand halfway, pointing it at the floor in front of James and Ralph. Their feet stopped moving, as if they'd suddenly landed in glue.

"Oh, Theodore, must you prolong dis?" Delacroix sighed. She swung her arm toward him and performed a complicated gesture with her fingers. Jackson's wand flicked out of his hand as if on a string. He grabbed for it, but it darted up and away. Delacroix made another gesture with her hand, and the wand snapped in midair, as if broken over a knee. Jackson's face didn't change, but he slowly lowered his hand, staring hard at the two pieces of his hickory wand. Then he turned back to Delacroix, his face white with fury, and began to pace toward her. Delacroix's hand moved like lightning, darting into the folds of her clothing and coming out with her horrible graperoot wand between her fingers.

"Dis may only be a representation of de real thing," she said playfully, "conjured from the dirt of dis place, just like dis version of myself, but I assure you, Theodore, it is exactly as powerful as I think it is. Don't make me destroy you."

Jackson stopped in his tracks, but his face didn't change. "I can't let you go through with this, Delacroix. You know that."

"Oh, but you already have!" she cackled gleefully. She pointed the wand at Jackson and flicked it. A bolt of ugly orange light shot from it, sending Jackson flying violently backwards. He landed hard on the upper stone steps, grunting in pain. He struggled to get up, and Delacroix rolled her eyes. "Heroes," she said disdainfully, and flicked her wand again. Jackson flew off the ground and rammed against another of the tree-pillars lining the grotto. He hung there, apparently knocked unconscious.

"And now," she said, lazily pointing her wand in the direction of James and Ralph, "please, join me."

The two boys were lifted from the ground and transported down the rest of the steps. They dropped clumsily to their feet in the grassy space at the bottom of the grotto, directly in front of the wraith of Madame Delacroix. Her eyes were emerald green and piercing. "Give me de robe. And please, don't make me harm either of you. I only ask de one time."

The book bag slipped off James' shoulder and struck the ground at his feet. He looked down at it, feeling dazed and completely hopeless. "Please," Delacroix said, and flicked her wand. James fell to his knees as if something extraordinarily heavy had landed on his shoulders. His hand plunged into the bag, clutched the robe, and pulled it out. Ralph struggled to grab it, but he seemed locked in place, unable to move more than a few inches in any direction. "Don't, James!"

"I'm not," he said hopelessly.

Delacroix's eyes sparkled greedily. She reached out a hand and delicately took the robe from James. "Free will is highly overrated," she said airily.

"You won't win," James said angrily. "You don't have all the relics."

Delacroix looked up from the robe, meeting James' eyes with an expression of polite surprise. "Don't I, Mr. Potter?"

"No!" James said, gritting his teeth. "We didn't get the broomstick. Tabitha still has it. I'm not even sure if she knows what it is, but I don't see her bringing it to you now, either way." He hoped he was right as he said it. He didn't see the broomstick anywhere in sight, and Tabitha certainly didn't seem to be present, unless she was hiding, like they had been.

Delacroix laughed lightly, as if James had just made a very witty remark at a party. "Dat was de perfect hiding place, wasn't it, Mr. Potter? And Miss Corsica is such the perfect individual to harbor it for me. Why, it's so perfect, in fact, that you never stood a chance of learning that it was, in fact, a clever lie. Interesting as it may be, Miss Corsica's broomstick is nothing more than a convenient ruse. No, like de robe, de Merlin staff has also found its way to me tonight, regardless of what you might think. It has been cared for very well, in fact."

The rather beautiful wraith of Madame Delacroix turned to Ralph and held out her hand. "Your wand, please, Mr. Deedle."

"N-no," Ralph protested, his voice almost a moan. He tried to back away.

"Don't make me insist, please, Ralph," Delacroix said, raising her own wand toward him.

Ralph's hand jerked up and went to his back pocket. Trembling, he produced his ridiculously huge wand. For the first time, James saw it for what it was. It wasn't just unusually thick, whittled to a point at one end. It was part of something that was, at one time, much larger, worn down with age, but still, as had been repeatedly shown, extremely and inexplicably powerful. Delacroix reached out and, almost daintily, plucked the Merlin staff from Ralph's hand.

"Dere was no point in my risking my own capture by smuggling such a thing onto the grounds. Surely someone would have detected it, had it been in my possession. Thus, I arranged for it to be sold to you and your charming father, Mr. Deedle. I was your salesman, in fact, though in a different guise. I do hope you enjoyed the use of the staff. Quite powerful, wasn't it? Oh, but now I see," she added, turning almost apologetic, "you thought that it was you who was de powerful one, didn't you? I'm so sorry, Mr. Deedle. Did you really think you'd have been allowed to enter the Keep if you hadn't had de staff of Merlin with you? Surely even you can see de humor in dat, can't you? You, a Muggle-born. Please, forgive me." She laughed again, lightly, maliciously.

"I'm here," Ralph muttered. "I'm just taking inventory of all my bones and major bodily functions. So far, nothing alarming, except that I need a bathroom even more than St. Lokimagus."

James climbed the steps into the gloom of the upper terraces of the grotto. The early morning light was faint and grey, barely making it through the brush and trees of the island. Zane and Ralph were climbing unsteadily to their feet.

"Merlin's gone," James said, looking around. "And I don't see Jackson or Delacroix, either." He stepped over the broken bits of Jackson's wand and shuddered.

"Guess we were wrong about him, weren't we?" Ralph said.

"We were wrong about loads of stuff," James agreed softly.

Zane rubbed his lower back and groaned. "Hey, we didn't do too bad, considering everything. We almost stopped Merlin's return, thanks to a handy length of log and my catlike reflexes." His voice sounded hollow in the flat echo of the grotto, and he fell silent. The three boys found the opening that led out to the dragon's head bridge, hacked through some weeds that had grown up to choke the space, and stumbled out into the dawn. The bridge had partially collapsed, and bore almost no resemblance to the frightening dragon's head anymore. The bank bordering the forest was muddy and wet, covered in morning dew.

"Hey look," Ralph said, pointing. There were tracks in the fresh, slippery mud.

"Looks like two people went that way. Away from the school," Zane said, bending over to study the sloppy markings. "You think one of them was Merlin?"

James shook his head. "No. Merlin wasn't wearing shoes. That looks like Delacroix and Jackson to me. She probably left first, and then he set out after her when he came to. Besides, something about Merlin tells me he doesn't leave tracks unless he makes a point of it."

"I hope Jackson breaks her in half when he catches her," Zane said, but without much passion.

"I hope *she* doesn't break *him*," Ralph replied morosely. "You saw what she did to his wand."

"Don't remind me," James muttered. "I don't want to think about it." He began to walk forward, heading generally into the woods where they'd left Prechka, but with no real destination in mind. He had a terrible suspicion about where Merlin had gone, and he, James, was responsible for that. Twice, Delacroix had called him her apprentice. She had influenced him, somehow, and he'd allowed it. He had played right into her plan, bringing the robe to her. She was right. She hadn't had to lift so much as a finger. True, things hadn't seemed to work out very well for her in the end, but that didn't mean much. A lone, rogue Merlin might be even more dangerous than a Merlin in league with people like the Progressive Element. At least they tried to operate under a guise of respectability. Merlin was from a different time, a more direct and deadly time. A nearly crushing weight of guilt and hopelessness pressed down on James as he plodded forward. Zane and Ralph followed quietly.

James walked purposefully into the forest, followed at a short distance by Harry, Zane, and Ralph. He threaded through the smaller trees at the perimeter, heading into the deeper heart of the forest, where the trees were huge and ancient and the sun was all but blocked out by rafters of dense foliage. For several minutes, the foursome walked in silence, and then, finally, James stopped. He turned on the spot, looking up into the shushing leaves and gently creaking branches. There were no other sounds. Harry, Zane, and Ralph stood twenty feet away, watching quietly. James closed his eyes for a moment, thinking, and then opened them again and spoke.

“I know a lot of you aren’t awake,” he began, looking up into the looming heights of the trees, “and I know that some of you who are awake aren’t on our side. But the ones who are will hear me, and I hope you’ll help. Merlin is out there somewhere. He may be far, far away by now, but even so, I think you know where he is. He talks to you, and I am betting you talk to him, too. I know tree sprites can talk, because we’ve already met one of you. I have a message for Merlin.”

James stopped and took another deep breath, not entirely sure what he meant to say. It had simply occurred to him that he should try. He had been used by Delacroix to help bring Merlin into the world, despite the best efforts of those who’d wished to prevent it. The knowledge that he’d allowed himself to be manipulated was horrible to him. All this time, he’d believed he was doing good, saving the world from evil, walking in the steps of his hero father. And yet his best intentions had been warped against him, against the world he’d hoped to protect. He’d tried to do it alone, like his dad had done, but he’d failed. He’d aided evil. And now evil expected him to give up. James didn’t intend to give up, though. Maybe now he could try to help in a different way. It was probably a long shot, probably utterly hopeless, but he had to try. Maybe this was *his* way, after all.

“Merlin,” James said uncertainly, “you said that Austramaddux made a mistake in bringing you to our time. You said he was selfish, that he just wanted to get out of the duty he swore to you. But Headmistress McGonagall thinks that you’re wrong. She thinks that this is the very time you were meant to return to, because this world needs your help to stop a war that might destroy us all. Well... I know I’m just a kid, but I think you’re *both* wrong.”

James glanced back at his dad. Harry gave a small shrug and nodded.

“I listened to everything you said, and what everybody said after you left, and I think you were brought to this time because *you* need something. You don’t know for sure if you’ve really ever done right or wrong. You don’t know if you controlled your powers or if they controlled you. I think the truth is that the world *does* need you now, but that *you* need this world, too. This is your chance--maybe your last chance--to prove that you are a good wizard after all. People have wondered for centuries whether you were good or bad, but who cares what the rest of history says about you? If you know in your own heart that you did the right thing when it really mattered, then it doesn’t matter what anybody else says. I don’t say this because I understand it myself yet, but at least I’m trying to learn it. You’re in this time no matter what, Merlin. Whoever brought you here means for you to rescue the world, but... I think you’re also here to be rescued from yourself.”



19. SECRETS UNVEILED

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Here is my little counselor, after all," Merlin said, looking up and lowering James' Technomancy textbook.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Minerva McGonagall, Mr. Finney. Pleased to meet you. I am Headmistress of this school."

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't say?" Finney replied, glancing at her. "How wonderfully whimsical."

"We like to think so."

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you quite all right, Miss?"

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

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

"Greetings," said Professor Binns.

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

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

"It's maaaaa-gic," Delacroix suddenly said, a bit inanely. She gave a ghastly grin.

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

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

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

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

Prescott's grin grew predatory. "Aha! Weren't prepared for that, were you? Yes, I had myself a good long look around the grounds while you were all busy this morning. Peeked here and there and got quite an eyeful! There is a garage," he said, turning to face the camera, "that penetrates the very fabric of space and time, creating a magical portal between this place and another place thousands of kilometers away! America, if I may be so bold as to guess! I have seen it myself. I have been inside the structure, and smelled the air of that far-off place. I have seen the sunrise of that land, while the sun here was high above the horizon. It was no trick, no illusion. These people would have us believe that they are mere tricksters, while I maintain, as I have witnessed with my own eyes, that they are dabblers in a form of magic that is purely and simply supernatural. Now I will prove it!" With a flourish, Prescott turned and marched away, heading back to the Entrance Hall. Harry fell in line next to Hubert, but couldn't get his attention.

left the wizarding world before I was old enough to sign the Wizarding Vow of Secrecy, too, so I wasn't breaking any laws. She promised me it was all right! She said it was for everybody's good and that I'd be a hero!"

"Miss Sacarhina," Harry said, producing his wand, but not quite brandishing it, "what do you have to say in response to this man's accusations?"

"I have nothing to say whatsoever," she replied easily. "He is clearly deranged. No one would believe the word of such a person."

"Mr. Recreant?" Harry said, turning to the stunned man. "Do you concur with Miss Sacarhina's assessment?"

Recreant's eyes moved like flies, flicking back and forth between Sacarhina and Harry. "I'd..." he began, and then lowered both his eyes and his voice. "I'd like the chance to discuss this outside of Miss Sacarhina's hearing."

"Mr. Recreant, as your superior, I forbid--"

"You'll forbid nothing, Madam," Neville said sternly, slipping his own wand from his robes.

"In the name of ambassadorial security, I have to insist..." Sacarhina began, but stopped as Harry pointed his wand at her.

"In the name of the Ministry of Magic and the Auror Department," he said, "I place you, Miss Brenda Sacarhina, under arrest for attempted violation of section two of the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy and for the theft of Ministry of Magic property."

Sacarhina tried to smile, but it was a relatively poor attempt. "You can't prove anything, Mr. Potter. This is a foolish and dangerous game you are playing. I will only warn you once to stand down."

"You should think twice before conspiring with people who despise you, Miss Sacarhina," Merlin said, smiling ruefully. "I had a charming and illuminating conversation with Madame Delacroix when I discovered her in the forest. She has much to say about you, I'm afraid, and very little of it is what I'd be prepared to call flattering."

Neville was leading Mr. Recreant out of the room, with the Headmistress following. Harry gestured with his wand. "Come, Miss Sacarhina. Titus Hardcastle awaits to escort you back to the Ministry, and patience is not one of his stronger suits."

Sacarhina's face went blank as she realized she had no choice but to follow along. No doubt she had a very good defense ready, James thought as she stalked out of the room in front of his dad. People like her always had lots of ways to cover their tracks. Still, it didn't look good for Brenda Sacarhina. As the door

leading to the Great Hall swung open, James saw Titus Hardcastle grinning mirthlessly, his wand pointing carefully at the floor.

James found himself left only with Merlin, Zane, Ralph, and Dennis Dolohov

Dennis looked at his son, and then touched him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Ralph. I really am. I was... confused."

"You should've told me, Dad," Ralph said, dropping his eyes.

Dennis nodded. After a moment, he raised his eyes to Merlin. "Am I going to go to wizarding prison?" he asked, trying to firm his voice. "I'll... I'll go along quietly, I guess."

"Somehow, I suspect not, Mr. Dolohov," Merlin said, turning to lead the group out of the chamber. He opened the door leading to the Great Hall. "But your actions have resulted in quite a conundrum. It appears that this school's security, strong as it may once have been, is not quite prepared to meet the challenges of modern Muggle technology. Perhaps you'd have some thoughts on how to improve it?"

Dennis frowned. "What are you suggesting? You want my *help*?"

Merlin shrugged. "I am simply acknowledging a rather curious coincidence. You are in need of employment and we are in need of a revised security programme. As a wizard who also happens to be an expert in Muggle technology, you seem rather uniquely qualified to serve in that regard."

Dennis grinned in relief. "I'll think about that, sir."

"I am in no position to make any offers on behalf of this school, of course," Merlin said, crossing the Great Hall with his long, commanding stride. "But I know the Headmistress. I'll see what I can do."

"So," Zane said, following Ralph and James into the Entrance Hall, "turns out you were of solid magical stock after all, Ralph, even if they were a bunch of cruel, heartless purebloods. Not that it matters, really, but it does sort of explain why you were made a Slytherin."

"Maybe," Ralph said quietly. "This is all too much for me to take in one day. Either way, none of that magic was mine. It was the staff."

Merlin stopped near the stairs, and then turned slowly. He gazed at Ralph speculatively. "You were the keeper of my staff?"

"Yeah," Ralph answered dejectedly. "I kept it from killing anyone, I guess. But barely."

"Don't listen to him," Zane said. "He was spectacular with it. Saved James' life once with it. Grew a peach tree out of a banana, too! So he once burned a bald stripe onto Victoire's head in D.A.D.A. All of us have thought about doing that to her from time to time just to shut her up."

“Ron Weasley’s in the fireplace. He wants to talk to you.”

James grinned. “Excellent! Tell him I’ll be right there!”

“James, look at you!” Uncle Ron cried when James tromped down the stairs a minute later, still tying his tie. “All respectable and everything. Have a good year, did you?”

James nodded. “I guess I did. Looks like I’ll pass, after all. Spent all of Monday night getting ready for Franklyn’s D.A.D.A. practical, then had the most horrible sensation that I’d forgotten everything five minutes before the test.”

“I wasn’t exactly talking about your schoolwork, you dunce,” said the face in the embers, grinning crookedly. “Your dad told me all about the Merlin conspiracy you uncovered. That’s brilliant stuff, and no mistake.”

“Yeah, well...,” James said sheepishly, “it was all pretty exciting there for a while, but it’s weird. Five weeks of schoolwork and suddenly all of that seems like it happened to someone else.”

That’s the way of it,” Ron nodded. “The dull parts of life spread out in your memory and crowd out the exciting parts until they just seem like little flashes. It’s the way your brain copes with it all, I guess. Speaking of which, how’s Professor Jackson doing?”

James rolled his eyes. “Nothing can keep old Stonewall down for long. He wasn’t really injured in his duel with Delacroix, even though his backup wand wasn’t as powerful as the one she broke. Apparently, he chased her through the woods for hours and finally cornered her in a clearing. He says he’d have gotten her, except that she cheated, calling on the enemy naiads and dryads to fight with her. The trees attacked him from behind, knocking him out. That’s how he got the big bruise on his forehead. Still, he was back in class the day after Prescott left, and he’s been raining fire on Zane and me ever since.”

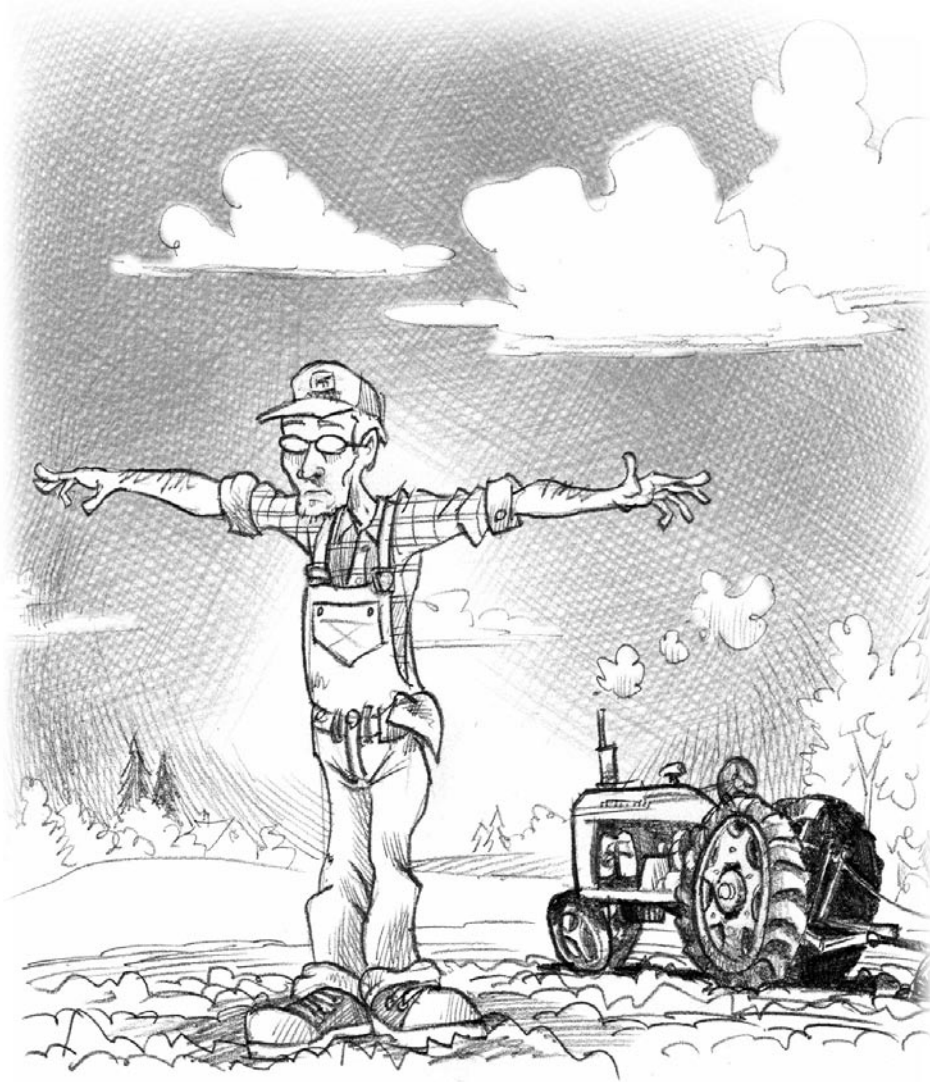
Ron raised an eyebrow. “Can’t really blame him, I guess.”

“We gave him back his briefcase and apologized and everything. I mean, I know we ruined his lifelong quest to protect the relic robe and prevent the return of the most dangerous wizard of all time and all, but come on. Merlin turned out to be all right. Delacroix got sent back to the States to stand trial in the American wizarding courts. Everything worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

“All I can say is if *I* was him, I’d wish you spiders in your drawers for the rest of your life,” Ron mused. “But that’s just me. My mind tends to go that way.”

“Honestly, Uncle Ron. I want to make it right. I *liked* Professor Jackson at first.”

“At the risk of sounding like a responsible adult, James, actions have consequences. Apologizing is great, but ‘sorry’ isn’t a magic word. You not only ruined Jackson’s plans, you took a stab at his pride. You



himself to the ground. The earth was broken up in clods of rich brown, crumbling amiably under his Redwing boots. Clete moved a few paces away from the tractor so to escape the chug of diesel fumes, and took a deep pull of the spring air. It was full of the scent of moist earth laid open, and the creek swollen with winter run-off, and tender green shoots along its steep banks. His stomach growled congenially, reminding him of the lunch Rachel was probably cooking right now: pork chops and sweet potatoes and canned beets. He half thought he could smell her cooking on the warm breeze, under all the other, earthy scents, but he knew that was impossible. He was half a mile from the house now, in the middle of the east field. He frowned in contentment, reminded himself that idleness was the sport of fools, and got on with what he was doing.

He straightened slowly and stared at the distant, heat shimmery horizon. What had he just been doing? He answered himself with the simple, unabashed honesty that had been the standard of his life so far. He had been flying. He frowned again, more animatedly, and raised his eyebrows.

"Who'd a thought it?" he remarked to himself.

After a moment's slightly distracted rumination, he turned back to the Farm-all, climbed up to the metal seat (which had soaked up a considerable amount of sun since he left it), stepped on the clutch and shifted back into gear.

Twenty minutes later he headed back to the house for lunch.

Clete didn't say anything to Rachel about the flying incident at lunch. In fact, by that evening, the thought of attempting to explain the event to her had hardly so much as crossed his mind. This wasn't because he thought she'd call him crazy. It wasn't even because he thought she wouldn't believe him. Neither of those considerations had occurred to him. Clete was a simple man. He hadn't told her because, basically, it didn't concern her. Perhaps if she had been his wife, he'd have mentioned it. Wives have a much more vested interest in the attitudes and lifestyles of a man than sisters do.

If Anne had still been alive, he would have told her. He probably wouldn't have said anything at lunch, in the middle of the day. She'd have had enough on her mind then, what with watching little Dennis and handling the laundry and thinking about dinner and all. But he'd have told her about it that evening, certainly. And most assuredly, he'd have told her before he made any attempt to try it again, as he was now. He'd have wanted her to know what he was doing before she saw him there on the south porch, flapping his arms like a scarecrow in a twister. It'd just be common courtesy.

Rachel, on the other hand, was different. Not different-bad, of course. Just different. Any man who has ever had a sister would know. Clete didn't tell Rachel.

He stood on the porch and looked contemplatively out over the fields and the scrubby trees beyond his barn. The great red structure was one of the secret prides of his life. It stood fifty-six feet tall from its cobblestone foundation to the beak of the wrought iron weather-cock, and it was just as straight and red as the day it had been built, back before Clete himself had even been born. The structure had four peaks, one on each side, and at the apex of those peaks, dead center above the building, was an old-fashioned vent-house reached only by a hand-made circular stairway at the edge of the hay loft. A few years back, the barn had even been featured in a magazine called *Country Living*. Clete remembered the photographer who had come out after the magazine people had called. He'd been a wiry young man with glasses, and his camera had been nearly as big as him. "So we can zoom right on up to that delightful bit of architecture at the top," the young man had explained. Clete offered to take the man up the winding stairway to the vent house, but the man

had declined somewhat hastily. Didn't like heights, Clete figured.

From the rear of the barn, he could hear the pigs in their pen, snorting and complaining over their dinner. Waves of stored warmth baked off the face of the house behind him, even as the sun dipped over the horizon and left the sky pale and sullen.

He had finished plowing the east field that day, and had gotten a good head start on the big loop that doglegged into Strecker woods as well. The Farm-all was now put away in the barn, along with the tiller, and the barn was neatly closed up. The swine had been fed, as had been the horses and Clete's lone milk cow, Bethel. Rachel was inside preparing an early dinner, listening to the local news on her ancient Philco transistor radio. Clete was satisfied that the time was right. He stepped away from the house and looked up.

The south porch was really just a patio, added by Clete's and Rachel's father some sixty years ago as a place to barbecue hogs for their occasional family reunions and Sunday School picnics. The brick barbecue had long fallen into an obscurity of hyacinth vines thanks to one of Rachel's beautification stints, but the patio itself had been claimed as one of Clete's personal evening areas. He had purchased a small redwood chair for the patio, and kept his pipe and tobacco in a small teak box beneath. Two and a half stories above the patio the peak of the roof protruded against the evening sky, tipped with a modest corner of white gingerbread. At the apex of the house's face, just under the old gingerbread, was a lit circular window. Clete had just come down from the attic and had purposely left the light on.

He turned back to the yard and dropped his gaze to the corner of the smoothed flagstone floor of the patio. Slowly and deliberately, as he had done in the field earlier that day, he stretched his arms out and began to move them. Up and down, up and down, first slowly and then with an increasing rhythm. Again, he felt that strange, perfect assurance come over him, just as it had in the east field when the idea first came to him. It made perfect sense. It was so simple that he was amazed he'd never thought of it before. One wasn't surprised, when he worked the pump lever, to see water stream out, was he? Or to find that the earth moves under him when he moves his feet in a walking motion? Of course not. So how could he have missed *this* before? This elementary, physical phenomenon of moving one's arms and achieving flight?

Yet he knew that it wasn't only physical. As he tested the air, feeling it like ephemeral harp strings under the musician's practiced hand, he could sense part of himself opening. It was like learning to whistle, or wiggle one's ears. He felt strange activity in his brain, as if he was using mental muscles that he had never before known how to flex.

And again, he felt the air thicken between his scissoring fingers. He felt it billow and fold under his cupped palms. He lifted tremulously to his toes and hovered there, his arms pumping swiftly, strongly. Air swirled in the bald vines of Rachel's hyacinth. He didn't know precisely how it

another load.

As he turned and walked out of the shadow of the barn to pick up the wheelbarrow, yet another idea struck Clete. This one was *exactly* like the idea he'd had while riding the Farm-all in the east field. He recognized the quality of it. It was like a post-hypnotic suggestion, or like meeting somebody you had only ever dreamed about. It came in the form of a question to himself.

Why am I walking all the way over to the feed shed to carry back sow feed?

Because the sows are hungry, he thought dimly. A hungry sow is an unhappy sow. An unhappy sow isn't a very tasty sow. But that wasn't the real thrust of the question. He knew that, because he'd asked it of himself. It wasn't why are you *getting* feed for the sows? It was why are you *walking* to get feed for the sows?

Maybe there was a different way of doing it; a way he could get the sows their feed without all the heavy work and strain on his already sore back. And it would probably be faster, too. Faster is more practical, if quality isn't spent, or so his mother always used to tell him.

The idea nagged at Clete. He adjusted his John Deere cap and rubbed thoughtfully at his upper lip. No harm in trying, he thought for the second time in three days.

He looked at the narrow face of the feed shed some thirty yards distant. It stared back at him blindly, full of dumb curiosity. *You lookin' over dis way?* a voice in Clete's head queried. It was the voice of the hired hand his parents had had when he was a small boy. A black man with graying hair. His name had been Chesapeake Chester, or at least that was what everyone called him. *Is it that ol' feed shed you starin' at, boy? If you want some feed to give those sows over yonder, you gonna hafta walk over an grab you up a sack. 'Less you know some other way t'do it...*

Clete could envision the inside of the shed. It was stuffy and full of the rich smells of animal feed and fertilizer. Rachel's rake and shovel and garden trowel hung on the right-hand wall, splashed with a dusty sun-beam from a missing plank along the back. To the left was a rack of two-by-four shelves, three high and three long. The shelves were stacked high with this season's store of feed and Garden-Grow. He could see the big, fifty pound burlap sacks with the picture of the smiling pig on the front. Hubbard Hog Feed, the legend over the smiling pig read.

Clete stared at the double doors of the feed shed and frowned that thoughtful, old man's frown under his glasses. He absently rubbed his upper lip, running the calluses of his thumb and fore-finger over the sand-papery gray stubble.

The doors opened.

There was no fanfare. No explosive motion or puff of magician's smoke. The doors simply swung apart and gently backed against the outside of the shed as if someone had casually pulled them open to get some feed. Clete wasn't surprised. He could feel the mental muscle flexing