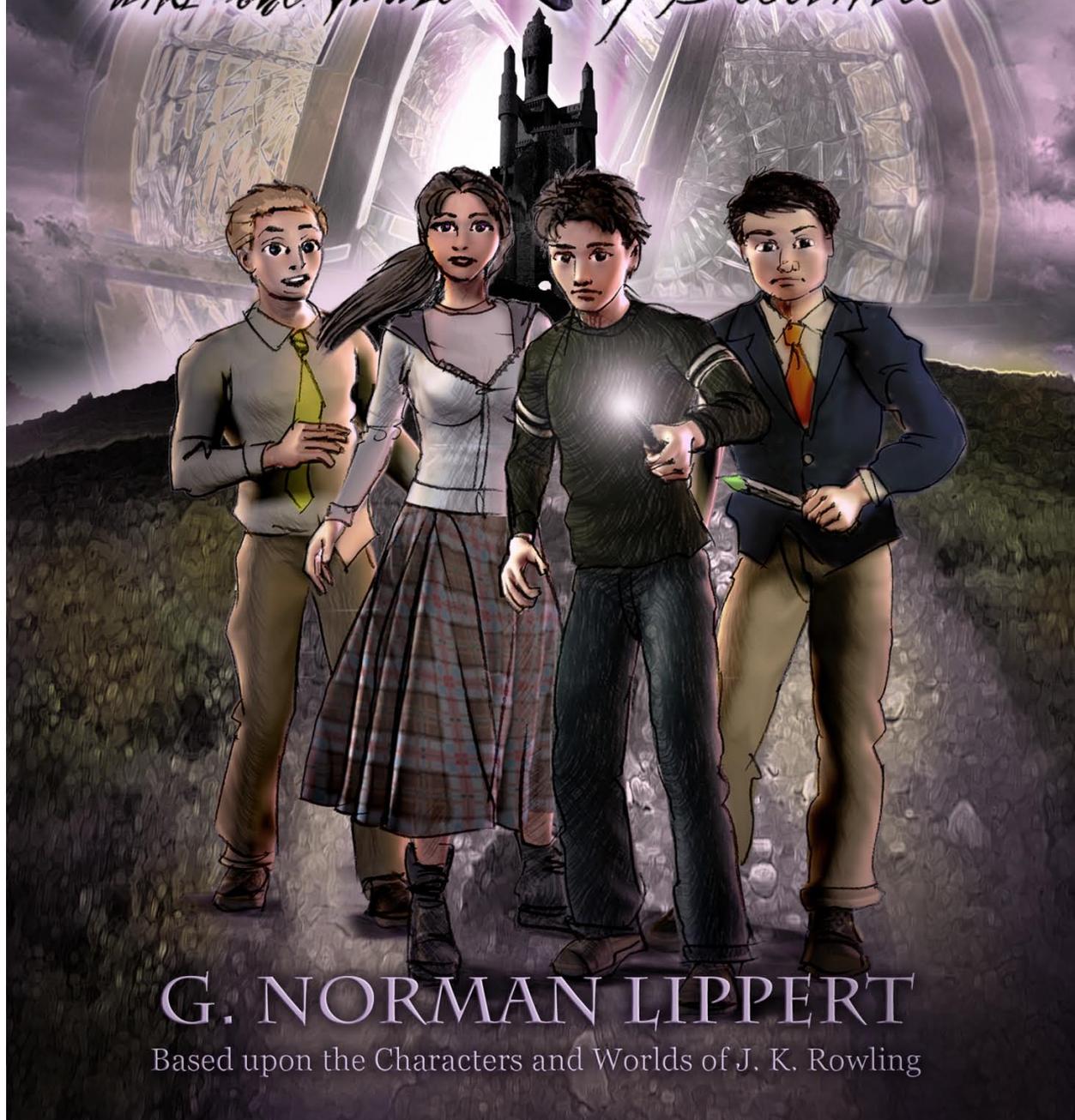


JAMES POTTER

and the Vault of Destinies



G. NORMAN LIPPERT

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

The story thus far...

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

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

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

In another vein, many of you know that between "Curse of the Gatekeeper" and this tale, I wrote a much shorter book called "The Girl on the Dock". This book, sometimes called (though not by me) "James Potter Two-and-a-half", is an entirely original side story featuring James' friend Petra Morganstern. Suffice it to say, much of what happened in that story heavily influences the plot of "Vault of Destinies", but fear not, dear reader: I have written the following story in such a way that "Girl on the Dock" is *not* required reading. I mention it only because if there is *any* chance that you'd like to read Petra's back story spoiler-free, you should probably do so fairly quickly (specifically, before reading chapter four, "the Dream Story"). For more information on "The Girl on the Dock", see the appropriate link at www.jamespotterseries.com.

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

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

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



PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Filmore had agreed, of course, albeit somewhat reluctantly. If it had required anything more than an evening's stopover in the lobby of the famed steel skyscraper, he probably wouldn't have.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

building. Standing silhouetted against the waving red fabric, Byrne lowered his head. He appeared to be in deep concentration. The crowd waited breathlessly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Apparently, the scene outside had not changed. Byrne still stood with his arms held out, his head lowered. Finally, theatrically, he dropped his arms and raised his head, flinging his hair back. Jets of white sparks burst into the air and the red curtain dropped, swirling and billowing as it fell. Beyond it was only empty space, punctuated by the crisscrossing beams of a dozen spotlights. The great shining building certainly appeared to be gone. The crowd exploded into frenzied applause and a live band struck up a tumultuous fanfare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hurry it up, Deckham,” Filmore said, climbing to his feet. “The fat lady’s about to sing.”

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

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

Behind it was nothing.

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

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

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

“Deckham! Something’s wrong! Get out here!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wha...!" Filmore stammered faintly. He opened and closed his mouth several times, boggling at the figure as it approached through the mist, walking jauntily. It appeared to be a man,

dressed all in black. A cloak flapped about his shoulders and his face was covered in a bizarre, metallic mask. As the figure approached, Filmore saw several more similarly dressed shapes unsheathe from the pounding mist, keeping their distance but watching him carefully.

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

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



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

“Number three, hold the O, extra mayo, get it while it’s hot,” he called without looking.

A waitress in a dingy rayon dress blew hair out of her face in annoyance. “Keep your hair on, I’ll get it in a second.” She turned back to an overweight couple crammed into the window booth. They leaned over the little dog-eared menus, studying them as if they were final exams. The man looked up at the waitress, his eyes swimming in a huge pair of black-rimmed glasses.

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

“Fancy--” the waitress blinked. She scoffed good-naturedly. “You don’t know where you are, do you?”

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

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

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

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

“Look,” the waitress said, lowering her order pad, “if you two need a few more minutes--”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You sweet-talker you,” Judy replied, cocking her hip. “You’re not from around here, then?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

much improved posture. He began to run down the alley, gripping his cane at his side. Judy smiled happily and leapt onto the curb, following the man into the alley.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, it’s plain, innit?” the man said, trembling. He finally peered back at her from over his right shoulder, still clutching his cane. “You’re from the Ministry. You found out about me cane. It’s not a proper wand, not really. I ordered it special through the post, but that’s not illegal now, is it? I mean, it barely works at all. It doesn’t violate my parole. You don’t need to send me back.”

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

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

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

“I see it now,” she said, shaking her head in wonderment. “An entirely magical society, living in secret. How very interestingly preposterous. My, how times have changed. And yet it makes

sense now. It is no wonder... but what good fortune that I happened to see you, my friend, and to recognize the strange nature of that cane of yours. What, pray tell, is your name?"

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

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

Blagwell nodded jerkily, his eyes bulging.

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

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

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

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

"*She* is there," the woman answered in a strangely singsong voice, her face now lost in the shadows. "I sensed it in the memory of her thoughts. It wasn't much, but it was all I needed. She went there, seeking refuge after her trial of the lake. I could not follow her, for her trail was lost, but two words remained, imprinted in the ether where the tree once stood, two words that I knew would take me to her: *James Potter*. Tell me where I may find him. Tell me, and everyone may be happy again. Perhaps even you, my unfortunate friend."

"Who are you?" Blagwell moaned, terrified.

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

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

She crossed the footpath and found a large puddle of water near the curb. It was covered in a thin rainbow sheen of oil. She saw herself reflected in the murky water, saw her own smile. It was indeed a pretty smile, one that inspired people, made them want to help her. No wonder the great sorcerer had once fallen for it. Judith remembered it vaguely although it wasn't her memory, not really. It was attached to this form, to the human shape she had assumed, like a note pinned to the

collar of a dress. She was not the Judith that the sorcerer had once known and loved, and yet she occupied a version of that Judith's shape, looking out of that woman's eyes, smiling her pretty smile. The great sorcerer had indeed fallen for this smile, and had very nearly lost everything in pursuit of it.

The truth was he still might.

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

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

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

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

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

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



1. HOGWARTS FAREWELLS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Rose!” James called, running to catch up to his cousin. “Look out behind you! It’s Ted!”

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

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

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

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

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

A tiny brick wall suddenly erupted out of the ground next to the football, a split second before George Weasley’s foot came into contact with it. The ball sprang off George’s foot, immediately struck the tiny wall, and shot up into the air, arcing high over George’s head. He craned his neck to watch. With a dull thud, the ball bounced between the rocks behind him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

James nodded. “One...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“At least *during* the wedding,” Lucy added reasonably.

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

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

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

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

James nodded, not amused. “It’s easy for you. You won’t know what you’re missing.”

Lucy shrugged. “Is that better, somehow?”

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

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

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

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

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

Thinking that, he felt a little bad about telling her that the coming trip would be easier for her. At least he’d had two years at Hogwarts already, two years of classes and studies, dorm life and meals in the Great Hall, even if all of it had been overlaid with some fairly spectacular events. Just when Lucy had been expecting to get her first taste of such things, it had gotten neatly snatched away from her. Considering Lucy’s personality, it was easy to forget that she was, if anything, probably even more upset about it than he was.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

“Where does th’ time go?” Hagrid went on, weaving onto the grass and aiming, with some difficulty, for his hut. “Why, it only seems like yesh... yesh... yesterday that it was li’l Harry and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But you *like* Arithmancy,” Ralph said, frowning.

She sighed angrily. “Just because I’m good at it doesn’t mean I like it.”

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

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

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

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

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

Rose nodded skeptically.

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

Albus frowned. “When *are* we leaving?”

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

James grumbled, “This just gets worse and worse.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I wasn’t even told the password,” James mourned to Lucy as they approached the portrait hole.

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

“James!” a voice called out. “I got your bed! Isn’t it cool?”

James looked and saw Cameron Creevey grinning at him from over the back of the hearth sofa, flanked by two boggling first-years. “It’s got your name on it and everything. My mates are dead jealous, of course. I’ve been telling the new students about last year. Remember when we went off to Hogsmeade in the tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow? Remember the wolf when we came back?”

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

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

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

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

“Things are looking a little slim for the Gremlins this year,” Sabrina said, lowering her hands to the table before her, where she was folding an auger out of a page of the Daily Prophet. “What

with Noah and Petra joining Ted in the fabled outside world and James running off to hobnob with his cronies in the States.”

“Yeah,” Damien said, raising his eyebrows derisively. “What’s up with that anyway?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Talking of *which*,” Ted said, sitting up in his chair, “she and the new Headmaster are having themselves a serious little chat right about now, up in his office. I heard Uncle Harry discussing it with the old man himself, and she admitted it when I got back to the castle. Seems there’s some question of whether she’s going to be allowed to come along on this little jaunt of yours, Potter.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What do *you* know about it?” James asked, meeting Damien’s eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is it them?” Sabrina asked, squinting quizzically. “They’re hard to make out.”

Ted nodded distractedly. “It’s them, they’re just far away. Shut it and listen.”

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

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

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

Merlin’s voice came again, calm and measured. “What do they remind you of?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sounds like a recipe,” Damien whispered. “Why’s he teaching Petra how to make popovers?”

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

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

“After all,” the Headmaster said, eyeing the foam ears scattered around the table, “one never knows when the need might arise for an unexpected treat. Which reminds me...” He retrieved something from the depths of his robes and held it out over the table. “I believe this belongs to you,

Mr. Lupin. I'll just, er, add it to the pile." He dropped the charmed peppermint onto the mess of Ted's pocket contents.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Morgan'," Sabrina corrected again, glancing around.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Likewise,” Lucy replied, nodding with practiced diplomacy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wulf isn’t a bloke, Sabrina,” Ted said, pointing at the headline. “It’s an organization.”

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

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

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

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

“I guess,” James answered, slumping again. “I don’t know.”

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

--Mum

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

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

“Bloody hell, Malfoy,” James breathed, shaking his head. “Don’t you ever sleep?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shut up,” James rasped, mortified. “You’re crazy!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I will, Ced. See you!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I see a world on fire," Trelawney said conversationally. She didn't seem to be talking to James or even to herself. Her words hung in the air almost like they had lives of their own, like solid things just outside the limits of human vision. James shivered, and yet her hand held him like a vice, as immobile as stone.

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

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

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

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

"Professor?" James gasped, struggling to roll her over. She was as stiff and cold as a plank of wood. He shook her. "Professor Trelawney?" She stared up at the dark ceiling, her eyes boggling blindly behind her spectacles, which had been knocked askew on her face. James was terrified. He

filled his lungs to call for help, but at that moment, the professor convulsed before him. She inhaled desperately, filling her narrow chest and flailing her arms, struggling to sit up. James grasped one of her cold hands and tugged her shoulder with his other hand, pulling her upright.

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

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

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

“Professor,” James said slowly, “are you sure you’re... I mean, what did all of that mean?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re confused. My dad was the Chosen One. Not me. It was his job to save the world.”

She shook her head slowly, and then laughed again. It was a thin hopeless sound. “Your father was indeed the chosen one. His task is finished. Now, the universe demands payment, and

that payment will come by your hand. It is done. You cannot escape your destiny, any more than your father could his.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

And that’s it for chapter one! What did you think?

Tomorrow’s chapter will be released at noon, CST, via www.jamespotterseries.com. In the meantime, come on over to the [Grotto Keep forum](#) to discuss what’s happened thus far! Speculations, cogitations, and ruminations galore.