



10. JAMES AND THE SKRIM

Students had begun to gather in the darkness around the Hall of Archives by the time Professor Jackson arrived and set up a perimeter of Werewolf House upperclassmen to guard the entrance. The gray-clothed students stood with military precision, hands clasped behind their backs, eyes staring out over the crowd as if daring anyone to try to pass them. Ralph, James, and Zane stood well back from the gathering observers, watching the proceedings with mixed curiosity and trepidation.

Ralph frowned at the Werewolf guards in the near distance. “What kind of stuff do they have in the Archive anyway?”

“I was only in there once before,” James replied, shrugging.

Zane was impressed. “Are you kidding?” he rasped. “I’ve been on campus a whole year and I’ve never once been allowed into the Archive chambers. Hardly anyone gets to go inside except for Bad Hadley and his student tech crew.”

“Is that a difficult crew to get on?” Ralph asked, looking aside at Zane.

“Nah, they’re always looking for new members,” Zane replied, shaking his head. “There’re sign-up sheets all over campus. But that’s like actual work. I wasn’t *that* curious.”

James asked, “So who’s Bad Hadley anyway?”

“Hadley Henredon,” Zane answered, lowering his voice. “He’s the Archive custodian. A Muggle, but totally devoted to his job. There’s some long tedious story about how he got the position in the first place, but you’ll have to ask somebody else about it if you really want to know. He’s old and terminally cranky, and he goes by loads of nicknames around the campus: Bad Hadley,

Hadley the Horrible, the Henredonkey, Captain Fisheye, Evil Enos, etc, etc, etc. Us Zombies came up with most of them.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed,” Ralph muttered.

Just then, Harry Potter and Oliver Wood arrived, crossing the lawns and cutting through the noisome throng. Zane saw them first, and grabbed Ralph’s sleeve.

“Come on,” he hissed, ducking through the knot of students.

“Where are we going?” Ralph asked, following along with James in tow.

Zane glanced back with a crooked grin. “Where else? To see what happened inside the Archive.”

James shook his head as they ducked through the babbling crowd. “They’ll never let us in there,” he whispered harshly.

“Sure they will,” Zane replied without looking back. “Just follow me and walk like you don’t expect anyone to stop you. You’d be amazed how often that works.”

James found himself falling into step behind his own father and Professor Wood as they ascended the steps. Next to him, Zane glanced around wisely, as if he was taking inventory of the pillars around the portico. He had his wand in his hand, held importantly at his side. James produced his own wand and held it the same way. Behind them, Ralph scuffled up the steps, pushing his lank hair out of his face. Almost before he knew it, the three boys found themselves ushered into the darkened entryway of the Hall, following in Harry Potter’s wake. The noise of the nervous crowd fell away behind them.

“Mr. Potter,” a voice echoed from the inner chamber. “I’m glad to see you’ve arrived. Your particular expertise might be of great value as we descend to the Archive floor.” It was Chancellor Franklyn, his wand lit and held overhead, providing the only light in the huge empty room.

“He seems to have gained some stowaways as well,” a woman’s voice commented. James recognized the Wizard Home Economics professor, Mother Newt, as she moved into the light next to Franklyn. “Excuse me, boys, but this is no place for students. You must leave this instant.”

“We’re witnesses!” Zane exclaimed suddenly, pushing James and Ralph forward. “The three of us saw it happen!”

“You witnessed the attack on this building?” Franklyn clarified, narrowing his eyes at Zane.

“Attack?” Ralph replied. “We saw lightning strike it. And we saw—”

“They were moving their belongings into their new house, Chancellor,” Merlin interrupted. “If you’ll recall, they visited us in the guest house a short while before. Their activities placed them in the vicinity of the phenomena when it occurred. It may prove valuable to interview them presently.”

“And this one,” Harry said, shaking his head and smiling down at James, “is my son, of course. He and these other two are quite trustworthy. I have called upon their services in the past.”

Franklyn removed his square spectacles and wiped them on his lapel, sighing. “As you wish. But let it be known that the school will not take any responsibility for anything that may befall them in this endeavor.”

“Nor would I expect it to,” Harry replied. “You mentioned with some confidence that what happened here was, in fact, an attack. How can you be so sure?”

“Did you feel the shift?” Franklyn asked in response.

“The shift?” Wood repeated thoughtfully. “Is that what it was?”

“I felt a shake of the earth,” Harry said, “as if a giant had stomped nearby. Is that what you are referring to?”

“That was not a shake of the earth,” a new voice said calmly. James looked up and saw Professor Jackson stride into the light from the rear of the room. His face was set into a grim scowl, but his eyes were electric as he glanced from face to face, ending on Harry. “The earth did not move,” he went on. “Your brain merely attributed the sensation to the most obvious source, but the shift took place on a much deeper, fundamental level.”

“I felt it,” Zane nodded. “It was as if the whole world suddenly stopped moving, making everything stumble for a moment.”

Merlin’s voice was solemn in the darkness. “But it wasn’t the world, was it, Professor? It was, if I may be so bold as to guess, the very fabric of reality.”

“It was a dimensional shift,” Jackson agreed soberly. “How deep a shift, we have yet to discover.”

“And the occurrence of this... shift,” Harry clarified, tilting his head, “is why you suspect the Hall of Archives was attacked?”

Jackson nodded once, curtly. “Mere lightning is not capable of what transpired here tonight, Mr. Potter.”

“I suggest we avoid using the elevator,” Franklyn announced, turning and striding toward the recessed door in the rear of the room. “Wands out, everyone. We cannot be certain that what happened here is entirely over. Professor Jackson and I will lead. Mother Newt, if you would be willing to stand guard at the upstairs entrance.”

Newt agreed to this with palpable reluctance. She moved next to the inner archive door and produced her wand with a flourish, leaving a trail of pink sparks in the air.

“Careful, dearies,” she said, smiling cryptically as James, Zane, and Ralph passed her, heading into the massive chamber beyond.

Inside, Ralph and Zane craned their heads at the marching rows of shelved miscellany and the massive chasm that dropped into the Archive’s spiraling depths. Silently, Franklyn led the group toward the stairway, which they began to descend in single file, with James, Ralph, and Zane in the rear.

As the group circled the throat of the Archive's staircase, James could see that the strange gold and purple light of the object at the bottom, the thing Franklyn had called the Vault of Destinies, was diminished to the point of darkness. Even more unsettling, the complicated motion of the Vault had completely ceased. It sat in the dim depths like a sort of gigantic gold and glass rose, its petals curled around some hidden shape. The group tromped on in somber silence, listening only to the shuffling clang of their feet on the metal steps. As they passed the lowest of the Archive's dizzying levels, the air grew so cold that James could see his breath puffing out before him. He shivered and pulled his blazer around him, buttoning it up.

Finally, the group reached the floor of the Archive and congregated in the darkness at the base of the stairs. The lowest level was smaller than the rest, and nearly empty. The stone walls dripped with cold water and tiny stalactites hung from the bottom of the stairs above like icicles. The center of the space was a round pool, its water mirror-flat. Over this, the Vault of Destinies was suspended inside a complicated iron framework. Close up, the Vault seemed quite large, slightly taller than Merlin, and comprised entirely of leaf-shaped golden shutters and purplish prisms. In motion, the overlapping shapes would form a dizzying shield of flashing metal and enchanted glass. Now, halted, they embraced the interior shape like a clenched fist. James tried to see inside, but couldn't make anything out.

"Professor Jackson, if you would extend the walkway," Franklyn said quietly, gesturing toward the pool and the dark Vault.

Jackson moved forward and flicked his wand, pronouncing a complicated incantation under his breath. A dull grinding noise sounded, and James startled as something floated over his shoulder. He was surprised to see that it was a block of stone, prized magically from the wall behind him. It floated past Jackson and lowered, touching the pool but not sinking. More stones wafted into place, forming a neat pathway that led toward the Vault. Franklyn stepped forward, his boots knocking on the stones, and raised his wand. Harry followed him, and James and Zane watched raptly, peering curiously at the darkly glimmering shape of the Vault.

Franklyn glanced back, his eyes wide, and James saw that the Chancellor was quite shaken. "My friends," he said, swallowing hard. "Never once has the magic of the Vault been breached. Never once has it been stilled, even by my own hand. Assuming that it opens now..." He paused and shook his head, apparently at a loss for words.

Harry nodded soberly and raised his wand, tip up. "Stay well back, James, and the rest of you. If you wish to return to the outside, now is your chance. None will blame you, and most will credit you for it. Professor Wood will accompany you if you choose to go."

Wood nodded and looked around. James shook his head, as did Zane.

"I know I should probably go," Ralph squeaked. "But if I do, I'll kick myself for the rest of my life. So open it already."

Professor Jackson fingered his own wand. "Open it, Chancellor. If the shift means what I fear, being outside the Archive will make no difference for any of us."

Franklyn nodded. He turned back to the Vault, his shoulders hunched, and raised his wand once more. Slowly, he lowered it, and as he did, the leaves began to move. Starting at the top, they began to shuttle aside, turning and descending silently, aligning with and overlapping the ones beneath. With solemn grace, the Vault bloomed, spreading and opening, revealing the shape inside, which was dark and complicated with shadows. As the final golden leaves settled into place, Franklyn stepped forward and raised his wand. Its light fell onto a shape that seemed to loom suddenly up out of the darkness, boggling with bulging eyes, its mouth gaping horribly. James gasped in shock and fear, as did Zane and Ralph. Zane's hand snatched out and grabbed a handful of James' blazer, as if for support.

"Hadley!" Franklyn cried out hoarsely, reaching to touch the figure that stood before him.

"I wouldn't do that," Merlin announced loudly, halting Franklyn and commanding his attention. Franklyn glanced back.

"It's Mr. Henredon! The custodian! He's been... he's...!"

"He looks like a statue," Harry said carefully, moving next to Franklyn on the stone footpath. "It's as if he was turned to stone in the act of trying to intervene in... whatever happened."

"He's been frozen," Merlin said, approaching slowly. "From the inside out. Every drop of his blood has been frozen as solid and brittle as glass."

"Is he... dead?" Franklyn asked, peering at the eerily still figure. Hadley's face seemed locked in a permanent rictus of wide-eyed terror. His right hand was stretched out before him, the fingers petrified into a grasping claw.

"He isn't dead, precisely," Merlin answered carefully. "He is... suspended. If any of us were to touch him, however, the warmth of our skin might... shatter him."

Franklyn recoiled slightly, his face contorting.

Jackson had his wand ready. "Stand aside, gentlemen," he instructed.

With impressive delicacy, Jackson levitated the frozen figure of Hadley up out of the unfurled shape of the Vault and settled him into place on the wet stone of the floor beneath the stairs. Hadley's shoes made a sound like clacking crockery when they touched the floor and the puddle froze instantly around them, producing a faint crackling hiss.

"Can we help him?" Harry asked, watching stoically.

"Only time and a very subtle increase in temperature will answer that question," Merlin sighed. "If he had been frozen outside of this already frosty climate, the warmth of the very air might have been enough to fracture him."

"We have the means and the facility to do whatever is required on his behalf," Jackson announced. "There is nothing further we can do for him at the moment, however. Let us attend to that which brought us here."

As one, the gathering turned toward the dark shape nestled inside the unfurled leaves of the Vault. Franklyn stepped forward once more and raised his wand, letting its light fall over the object.

To James, it looked like a sort of wooden table or platform, covered in ornate curlicue carvings and painted painstakingly in shades of blue and gold. Thick beams stood upright within and over the platform, holding a complicated apparatus of hinged arms, treadles, and spoked wheels. At one end of the platform, standing like vibrantly colored totems, were thick spools of thread. At the other end, a banner of thick, richly patterned fabric trailed toward the floor, where it overlapped onto itself in gentle folds. As James peered closer, he saw that the fabric was a sort of tapestry or rug, and that it was, in fact, extremely long, folded back and forth on itself dozens, maybe even hundreds of times. The wooden object itself seemed to be sitting on the mound of carpet, held up by it in the center of the Vault's folded leaves.

"It's a loom," Oliver Wood said, his voice low with awe.

Jackson nodded slowly. "It is indeed. Its innumerable threads represent the lives of every living person on the planet. It is their history, condensed into a pattern so complex, so interwoven, that none can decipher it."

"Then that," Harry said, gesturing toward the carpet that pooled from the Loom's end, "is all of the world's history."

Franklyn sighed and nodded toward the spools of richly colored thread at the opposite end. "And that, as you might imagine, is the future, unmade and unknowable."

Merlin asked the most obvious question of all. "Then why, pray tell, is the Loom stopped?"

"I believe that it was annihilated," Jackson answered.

Harry turned toward the steely-haired professor. "How can that be?" he asked. "It's right here."

"This is *a* Loom," Jackson replied meaningfully, "but it is not *our* Loom."

"I'm a little lost here," Wood said, raising his hand.

Franklyn shook his head worriedly. "What Professor Jackson is saying is that the Loom equals destiny. Destinies cannot be destroyed since they are representations of things far larger, far heavier than any of us could comprehend. They are like the axles of existence, utterly unbreakable and inviolate. Theoretically, however, they *can* be... *shifted*. Given a shock of enough magnitude, the destiny of one reality can be forced into the next, causing a chain reaction throughout every dimension."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "If I understand you correctly, Chancellor, Professor Jackson, you are suggesting that the Loom of *our* universe was attacked in some monumental way, and the result was that our Loom was switched with that of *another* universe. Is that an accurate summary?"

"That's crazy," Oliver Wood frowned. "You can't swap destinies."

Merlin shook his head very slowly. "On the contrary, Professor, human beings swap destinies every day, at every moment. Each individual's destiny is, of course, merely the sum total of the choices that they make throughout their lives. This, however, is on a magnitude far greater."

“According to my theories,” Jackson went on, squinting closely at the Loom, “our reality should have instantly rejected any foreign destiny. In other words, the very moment that our Loom was forced into another realm, and was replaced with the Loom of some other reality, the balance of the cosmos should have mandated the switch to reverse itself. Something, it appears, is interrupting the self-correcting paradigm of the dimensional continuum.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Technomancy was never my strong suit. I don’t quite understand.”

Zane spoke up, surprising James. “Somebody switched the destiny of our universe with some other destiny,” he said seriously. “And then they jammed a chair under the doorknob, forcing that destiny to be stuck here for good, instead of reverting back to where it came from.”

“What does that mean?” Wood asked, looking from face to face. “And how did it happen?”

Jackson stepped forward, still peering narrowly at the halted Loom. “It very well might mean that our reality, from this moment on, could be steadily degrading, breaking down, and grinding into chaos,” he said with characteristic bluntness. “As for *how* it happened, what is preventing this Loom from returning to the alternate reality from whence it came... I think the answer to that is quite obvious.” He bent slightly at the waist, not taking his eyes from the Loom.

James followed his gaze, stepping forward as well. Everyone did. At first, James couldn’t see what it was that the professor was looking at. Franklyn raised his wand once more, however, illuminating the Loom, and the problem became immediately apparent. Something glimmered very faintly in the air over the working space of the Loom, where the countless threads came together and melded into the ever constant flow of the carpet.

One of the threads had been broken and torn out of the carpet. What was left of it was bright red, shining almost as if it was made of finely spun wire. It waved very faintly in the air, forming a curling shape over the fabric from which it had been torn, leaving only the bit that fed from the spools. The broken thread made a shape in the air almost like a question mark.

“Well,” Merlin said slowly, his voice so low that it seemed to vibrate, “this... changes everything.”



The Kite and Key was a small tavern built in one of the oldest quarters of the campus, on the far side of Faculty Row, near a corner of the stone wall that enclosed the school. It served many of

the same drinks as James had once procured at the Three Broomsticks, including Butterbeer, pumpkin juice and, for the older students, Firewhisky. Not surprisingly, however, it also served some distinctly American drinks and potions, such as Honeylager (which tasted a bit like a Butterbeer that had been allowed to ferment on a windowsill for a week or two) and, also for the older students and faculty, a very dark brown potion with a frothy head called Dragonmeade.

Franklyn drank two Dragonmeades as the night progressed while Harry, Oliver Wood, and Professor Jackson settled for Honeylagers as they discussed the evening's events in low, serious tones. Mother Newt sat in the corner of the table closest to the tiny bay window, knitting and humming to herself, and yet James could tell that she didn't miss a single word that was spoken. This was born out by the few things that she did say, which were always heeded with great deference by the others at the table.

James, Ralph, and Zane sat at the end of the table, nursing Butterbeers and trying to keep up with the discussion. The adults' low, confidential tones of voice, however, and the noise of the rest of the tavern made their attempts to listen rather frustrating.

"Either way," Mother Newt said finally, not looking up from her knitting, "a destiny is a destiny, no matter which Loom represents it. The world still turns. We each have our choices laid before us, as has always been."

"But this Loom has ceased its operation," Jackson replied, raising an eyebrow.

Newt nodded, still knitting casually. Beneath her industrious fingers pooled a small sweater with a jack-o'-lantern on the front under the words, 'GRAMMA'S LITTLE PUNKIN'. "But it is not our Loom, as you have so astutely discovered, Professor. Wherever our Loom is, it may still be operating, still recording everything we do, just as always."

In a low voice, Wood asked, "And what of the realm from which *this* Loom has come?"

Newt clucked her tongue. "Perhaps they are not so lucky. Or perhaps their Loom was already stopped. Perhaps it comes from a realm not as fortunate as ours, and their destiny has already met its doom. There is no way for us to know, but fortunately, it is not our concern."

"Mother Newt is quite right," Franklyn agreed, settling his empty Dragonmeade glass onto the table. A dragon's talon clinked in the bottom of the glass, black and hooked. "We have only one concern, and we must treat it with the utmost care and secrecy."

James looked up at his father as he nodded somberly, his glasses flashing in the dim light of the Kite and Key's hanging lanterns. "We must find the missing red thread," he agreed. "Once it is returned to the Loom, it may set everything to rights once again. If it were possible to know who that particular thread represents, our task might be substantially easier."

"You may be certain that we will spend all of our considerable arts on that particular question," Franklyn said. "Professor Jackson is the foremost expert on the Loom. If anyone can discover its secrets, it is him."

Jackson sighed and shook his head. "Alas, it may be impossible. But we shall see what can be done."

“In the meantime,” Harry added briskly, “I will do my part. Now that the witnesses have been interviewed properly in the Chancellor’s office.” He turned to James, Ralph, and Zane and eyed them seriously. “Thanks to them, we have our first lead. Two women, one grown, the other in her late teens, were seen leaving the scene of the attack mere moments after it occurred.” Here, he winked at James, unsmiling. James understood the wink. Merlin had purposely arranged for Petra’s name to be left out of the official account, but Harry Potter was privy to the secret. James nodded at his father, frowning slightly.

“There is another lead,” Mother Newt commented, looking up seriously. “The stolen thread itself will leave its own trail.”

Franklyn nodded. “Quite so. It is well-known that the Loom is intensely magical. This is why we store it buried deep in the earth, where its radiant enchantment cannot interfere with the day-to-day magic of the school. A stolen thread from the Loom, especially that taken from a Loom from some foreign dimension, will leave a magical imprint as powerful as any single object in the wizarding world. As we speak, I have alerted the local authorities to fan out across the city in search of any unusual sources of power. I suspect we will discover the trail of the thread almost immediately. Let us hope, if and when we do, that it will not already be too late.”

Feeling somewhat mollified by Franklyn’s assurance, James stopped listening. Some time later, he, Ralph, and Zane finished their Butterbeers and excused themselves from the gathering. Only Harry and Oliver Wood noticed, waving goodbye to the boys as they made their way to the tavern’s tiny doorway.

Outside, the moon had risen high into the sky, shining brightly now that the clouds had blown away. Moonlight lit the campus eerily, making the glow of the scattered lampposts seem rather unnecessary. The boys spoke in low voices as they made their way across the campus, stopping at the entry to the common dorm to retrieve James’ and Ralph’s trunks and bags. In the near distance, the Administration Hall’s clock tower rang out, announcing nine o’clock.

As the boys returned to Apollo Mansion, lugging and levitating their various trunks, they discovered a group of witches sitting on the low portico, speaking in hushed voices. Lucy was among them, as was Aunt Audrey and James’ mum. Ginny stood as the boys approached, her eyes bright in the moonlight.

“Is everybody all right?” Lucy asked. James saw that she was still wearing her Vampire House tie and blazer, buttoned against the slight chill of the evening.

“Everybody’s fine,” Zane sighed. “It’s the world that’s in sorry shape. According to everybody who knows anything about anything, it’s high time we packed up and started looking for a new dimension.”

Ginny shook her head dismissively. “I’m sure it isn’t as bad as that,” she said. “It rarely ever is.”

“I’m going to walk Lucy back to her dormitory,” Aunt Audrey sighed, getting to her feet from the front steps. “I’ll meet you back at the guest house in a little while, Ginevra, to see Neville and the Headmaster off. That’s assuming that they still plan to leave tonight.”

“I suspect so,” Ginny agreed. “Goodnight Lucy. Lily says congratulations on getting into Vampire House. She’s started reading those books by your new Head of House, and she’s totally jealous of you.”

James rolled his eyes as he pulled his trunk up onto the portico. “Where is Lil anyway?”

“She’s back at our new flat with your Uncle Percy and Molly. Percy will probably blow a cauldron when he hears what happened here tonight, and him not here to get all worked up about it.” She sighed and settled to a seat on James’ trunk. “Wait with me, won’t you, son? Your father promised he’d be back before nine thirty. Keep your mum company until then.” She patted the trunk next to her, where there was just enough room for James to sit as well. He did and she put her arm around him. Ralph and Zane plopped onto another trunk at the base of the steps, resting their chins on their hands, as if too tired to go on. The moon shone on them all with its bony glow and James couldn’t help worrying. It had been a strange, foreboding evening, and the worst of it still seemed to be happening, what with the stopped Loom and the missing thread and the twin mysteries of Petra’s involvement and the enigmatic woman that had been with her. He sighed deeply, feeling greatly unsettled.

“I almost forgot,” Ginny said, sitting up suddenly. “You left this in the galley of the *Gwyndemere*. Captain Farragut gave it to me before we disembarked.” She retrieved her shoulder bag and rummaged in it. A moment later, she produced a thick gray sweater from the depths of the small bag. “Your grandmother made this for you,” she said reproachfully, handing the sweater to her son. “If she learned you’d lost it during the voyage...”

“She’d probably make me a new one out of Devil’s Snare,” James sighed. He knew the mantra of their family quite well.

“That’s right,” Ginny smiled. “Now put it on before you catch cold out here. You two should bundle up as well. It’s getting chilly and late.”

“Yes ma’am,” Zane said hollowly, not making any effort to get up.

Ginny looked from face to face, her brow lowered slightly. Finally she took James’ chin in her hand and turned his face to hers. “Cut it out!” she said sternly, surprising him.

“What?” he exclaimed, pulling away. “I’m not doing anything!”

“Yes you are,” she insisted seriously. “All three of you are. I recognize it as plain as day. You’re getting all wrapped up in what happened tonight. Pretty soon you’ll start feeling like you all need to go out and do something huge and daring to set it to rights. I see it on your faces as plain as day. So cut it out!”

“We’re not, Mum!” James protested, his face reddening. “We’re just sitting here, for Merlin’s sake!”

Ginny softened very slightly. “I know the look,” she said, shaking her head. “You can’t grow up around the likes of your father, Uncle Ron, and Aunt Hermione and not recognize when the wheels of some half-brained adventure start turning.”

“Well,” Ralph said, sitting up on his trunk, “we were there when the Archive was attacked, after all. We saw what happened. And we know even more about it than Chancellor Franklyn does, thanks to Merlin. We have something to do with it already, don’t we? It’s not our fault fate keeps doing stuff like this to us.”

“*That’s* what I’m talking about,” Ginny said firmly. “Look, you won’t hear me say this very often, so pay attention. Fate is a nasty, sneaky prankster. You don’t have to do what she tells you, no matter what the storybooks say. You *do* have to do what *I* tell you. Zane Walker, I’ve met your mother and if she was here, she’d tell you the same thing I am. And Ralph, I’m the closest thing you’ve *got* to a mum, so you heed me as well. You three already have a job to do, but it isn’t saving the world. It’s learning Arithmancy, and playing Quidditch and whatever that strange American sport is with all the rings and Cudgels, and... well, meeting girls. If the world needs saving, then it’s a job best left to your father and Merlin and the rest of them. They’ve all done it before, after all. It’s rather old hat for them. You don’t need to worry about it.”

James sighed and rolled his eyes. “We’re not, Mum. Lay off us, all right?”

Ginny met her son’s eyes and searched them. After a long moment, she seemed to grudgingly accept what she saw there. She nodded slowly.

“It’s going to be all right,” she said, turning to address the three of them. “Are you hearing me? You lot don’t need to worry about it. It’s going to be fine. It always is, isn’t it?”

James nodded as his mother put her arm around him again. It did always seem to end up being all right, no matter how bad things looked at any given moment. And yet he couldn’t help thinking of Merlin’s words when they’d all seen the Loom with its broken crimson thread: *this changes everything*.

And on the heels of that, echoing in his memory like a tickling feather, he recalled Scorpius Malfoy’s comment on the morning their journey had begun. *Fate seems to enjoy placing you Potters right onto the bull’s-eyes of history*, he’d said, as if anticipating James’ mother’s words. *It might be a good idea to try not to be too... distracted if that should happen again*.

In the moonlight, James shuddered slightly under his mother’s arm.



As with all initially unfamiliar things, James found life at Alma Aleron dizzyingly foreign at first, and then merely odd, and finally, nearing the end of his first week, only occasionally eccentric but otherwise fairly manageable.

Unlike the sleeping quarters he had been used to at Hogwarts, the Bigfoot dormitory was divided into a warren of small bedrooms on the third floor, extending up into the attic. Some of the rooms housed as many as six students, but Ralph and James found themselves in a very small two-person room at the end of the main hall. Upon inspection, James determined that until fairly recently, the room had probably served as a maintenance closet. This suspicion was cemented late during their first night when the janitor came in and shone a torch around the room, claiming to be in search of a spare mop. He didn't seem particularly surprised to find James and Ralph blinking blearily at him from the darkness, however, and spent some time rummaging under their beds in search of the missing mop, which he eventually found.

Over the course of the first few days of school, James and Ralph enlisted Zane's help in decorating their room, filling it with Quidditch posters, a makeshift Gryffindor banner (hung tactfully next to a Bigfoot House crest), an old carpet they'd rescued from the trash cans behind the common dorm, and a small bust of Sir Percival Pepperpock, which was enchanted to say amusingly crass phrases whenever the dorm room door opened.

The upshot of life in Apollo Mansion, however, was that the rest of Bigfoot House seemed to accept James and Ralph with a fairly universal degree of equanimity, nearly approaching boredom. They seemed to be a good and loyal bunch, surprisingly diverse, with members from all over the world and even representing a variety of humanoid species. There was a sophomore goblin named Nicklebrigg and an overweight junior Veela named Jazmine Jade, upon whom Ralph seemed to have a rather hopeless crush despite her obvious, and perplexing, lack of self-esteem. There was even an actual Bigfoot with long ape-like arms, feet the size of frying pans, and an inexplicable predilection for polka music, which he played for hours at a time on the house's ancient record player.

Oliver Wood was quick to introduce James and Ralph to all of their housemates during evenings spent in the basement game room, under the twin gazes of the stuffed deer and moose heads, affectionately known as Heckle and Jeckle. Both boys found themselves becoming increasingly familiar with the names and faces of their fellow Bigfoots as they passed them on their way to the common bathroom each morning. There were no bullies or obnoxious gits in Bigfoot House, but neither were there any apparently shining stars, either academically or athletically.

"We're a team," Wood proclaimed happily, nodding at the Bigfoots as they congregated around the game room of an evening. "No standouts on either end, but that just makes us stronger in the middle. No other house can boast that."

Secretly, James wondered if that was such a particularly good thing. When he asked Zane about it, the boy nodded enthusiastically.

"I know exactly what you mean!" he exclaimed. "Apart from you and the Ralphinator, Bigfoot House is like a magnet for the mediocre. It's like living on the Island of Misfit Toys!"

James didn't understand the reference and stopped Zane with a sigh and a roll of his eyes when the blonde boy attempted to explain it.

Getting the hang of all the new classes was by far the hardest part of adjusting to life at Alma Aleron. Finding the classrooms, which were scattered all over the sprawling autumn campus, was

made far easier by the fact that Zane seemed to be in almost all of the same classes as James and Ralph, and he knew his way around the campus very well.

The class names, however, often seemed unnecessarily obtuse and confusing. Many of the classes James was accustomed to at Hogwarts didn't seem to have any American equivalent whatsoever. On the other hand, the American wizarding curriculum included courses on such things as Muggle Occupation Studies (or Mug-Occ, as it was known among the students) and Clockwork Mechanics, which were not at all a part of James' previous Hogwarts studies.

Some of the classes he liked quite a lot, such as Magi-American History, which was taught by a full-fledged American giant named Paul Bunyan, and Advanced Elemental Transmutation, which was the American version of Transfiguration. Others he dreaded exquisitely, such as Precognitive Engineering and Mageography, with the stultifyingly dull Professor Wimrinkle. His most hated class, however, was the American equivalent of Defense Against the Dark Arts, known locally as Forbidden Practices and Cursology. Taught by the insufferable Persephone Remora, the only students that seemed to enjoy the class were the members of her own Vampire House, who adored and revered the professor with something like fanatical devotion.

As it turned out, Remora had made quite a reputation for herself by writing a series of wizarding romance novels about fictional American vampires with amazingly cool names and darkly dashing personalities. In class, she made thinly veiled references to the ongoing progress of her latest book, claiming that her stories were not fictional at all, but merely novelized accounts of her own life experiences.

"Much like another series of books based loosely on the exploits of a certain famous wizard," she said in class, sniffing disdainfully and glancing furtively at James. "Although mine," she went on breezily, "are not biased in favor of the main characters. *I* write my tales exactly as they happened, with an eye toward intellectual honesty."

"*And* adjective-heavy run-on sentences," Zane mumbled under his breath, his face low over his parchment as he doodled.

The Shard of the *Amsera Certh* had proven to be exactly as refreshing to James and Ralph as Merlin had implied. Most afternoons, James would return to his and Ralph's dormitory room on the third floor of Apollo Mansion and uncover the Shard. He'd tap it with his wand and say the phrase that Merlin had taught him and watch as the Gryffindor common room swam into view, usually filled with late evening activity. The first time he had done it, both Ralph and Zane had been with him, and they had succeeded in startling Cameron Creevey quite badly, calling his name from the enchanted mirror over the Gryffindor fireplace.

"Cam!" James had called, cupping his hands to his mouth and leaning close to the Shard where it hung on the back of his dormitory room door. "Cam! Can you hear me? It's me and Ralph and Zane! Where's Rose and everybody?"

Cameron had lowered the Potions book he'd been studying and glanced around uncertainly. When James called his name again, the boy looked up, saw the three boys' faces in the mirror over

the hearth, and leapt neatly over the back of the hearth sofa, throwing his book into the air. A second later, he peered over the back of the sofa, his eyes wild.

“Somebody killed James!” he cried out shrilly. “And Ralph Deedle! And that third bloke, the blonde one that they hung out with their first year! They’re haunting us in the mirror! Look!” He pointed frantically as James, Ralph, and Zane dissolved into laughter. It was nearly a minute before they could recover enough to explain to the gathered students on the other side of the Shard that they weren’t ghosts at all, but were simply communicating from the States via Merlin’s magical Mirror.

As they finished, James heard Rose’s voice as she pushed through the crowd of Gryffindors. “James? Is that you? Move aside, Paulson, you great ape!” She elbowed her way to the front and leaned close to the mirror on her side. “James,” she asked gravely, “what are the three of you doing in the mirror?”

James drew a breath to answer, but Rose shook her head impatiently. “Never mind. Tell me this first: is it true that the American students get to take weekly field trips to some giant unplottable prairie where Native American Indians still sleep in teepees and live like they did three hundred years ago? Because if it is, I don’t even want to talk to you again out of sheer dead jealousy.”

“No, Rose,” James laughed. “Nothing like that’s happened. So far, classes here are almost just like classes back home. Some are good, some are bad, but it’s just school. Different country, same routine.”

Rose sighed skeptically. “All right then,” she said, plopping onto the sofa. Cameron Creevey was still peering over it, his eyes wide. Rose planted a hand on the side of his head and shoved him away. “So how is it there, then? How are you two and Lucy and everyone else settling in? Tell me everything, spare nothing.”

James shook his head helplessly, not knowing where to begin. Zane, however, skipped right to the bit that most interested him. “Petra’s turned all evil schizo on us!” he exclaimed, his eyes going wide. “She attacked the Hall of Archives and destroyed life as we know it!”

“Shut *up!*” James said, pushing his friend aside. “We’re not supposed to talk about that! And besides, she says that it *wasn’t* her!”

“She says that she was asleep when it happened, along with Izzy in her rooms on campus,” Ralph clarified, raising a finger. “And Merlin only told us to keep it a secret around the school. He didn’t say anything about our friends back home.”

“Wait a minute,” a different voice said from the other side of the Shard. James looked up and saw Scorpius Malfoy seating himself on the sofa next to Rose as the rest of the students drifted back to their homework and various conversations. “What’s this about Morganstern? Are you telling us that she’s already gotten into trouble with the Americans?”

“No!” James said immediately, glancing warningly at Ralph and Zane. “There was some confusion, but nobody really knows what happened. It’s... complicated.”

Together, the three boys explained the events that surrounded the attack on the Vault of Destinies, ending with the details of their interview with Chancellor Franklyn, Merlin, and James' father in the Chancellor's office, which had occurred later that night.

"So Merlin didn't let you tell the Americans that it was Petra you saw leaving the Archive?" Rose asked, frowning.

"He didn't really stop us from saying so," Ralph answered. "He just sort of... explained it to Franklyn on our behalf, leaving that bit out, and we didn't contradict him. It helped that those crazy loons at the W.U.L.F. released an announcement the next day claiming that *they* had been the ones responsible for the attack. They said that if Harry Potter and his people didn't return home, there soon wouldn't be any home for them to return to."

Rose frowned. "Do you think it really was the W.U.L.F. that was responsible for the attack?"

"It would make sense," Zane nodded. "They already went after James' dad and the rest of us once, on the *Zephyr* ride here."

At that point, the conversation turned to an excited recitation of the travelers' adventure on the train and the warning issued by the W.U.L.F. leader immediately before he flew away. Finally, Rose shook her head thoughtfully.

"And yet it wasn't the W.U.L.F. leader you saw coming out of the Archive after the attack," she mused. "It was Petra and some other woman, right?"

"Unofficially, yes," Zane agreed. "According to Merlin's version of the story, we just saw two women leaving the Archive. He seemed to want to keep Petra's part secret."

From the other side of the Shard, Scorpius asked, "Why would he do that?"

"He said something about it to me afterwards," James admitted, shuffling his feet. "He said... that it was important that he choose his battles wisely, whatever *that* means. He talked to Petra himself after the whole thing was over, right before he left. And then he came and talked to me. He said that it would be best if we kept what we knew to ourselves since the Americans wouldn't have the... er... *facilities* to properly handle any investigation of Petra. That's exactly how he put it, but I don't know what in the world he meant by it. And then he asked me, along with Ralph and Zane, to keep an eye on her, for him."

"He knew that she was involved in the attack on the Vault and he just let her go?" Rose said skeptically. "Pardon me for saying so, but that seems extremely odd. What did he want you to watch out for?"

James shrugged, looking from face to face. "First of all, maybe she *wasn't* really involved," he insisted. "Maybe it was... I don't know... someone using Polyjuice Potion or something."

Scorpius sighed wearily. "Potter, your blind loyalty is getting to be a bit of a drag. Isn't this exactly like what happened last year, when you refused to admit that you saw the Headmaster in the Magic Mirror, consorting with villains?"

James' face heated. "I ended up being right, didn't I?" he replied. "I mean, sure, it *was* Merlin, but he hadn't gone all evil. And neither has Petra."

Rose waved a hand impatiently. "So what are you supposed to be watching out for with Petra?"

James sighed. "Anything... out of the ordinary, I guess. Merlin didn't get specific. She's gotten herself an apprenticeship position here at the school, working with the Potions Master, so we'll be seeing her at least twice a week. Merlin must trust her because he helped get her the post."

Scorpius looked thoughtful where he sat on the sofa next to Rose. "Maybe Merlin got her the post *in order* to make it easier for them to keep an eye on her."

"Why wouldn't he just bring her and Izzy back here with him?" Rose asked, looking aside at the boy next to her.

"Maybe he can't," Scorpius answered simply.

"Wait a minute..." Zane said, narrowing his eyes. He leaned forward and peered critically into the Shard, his face contorted in the comic half-grin that marked his version of deep thought. "Are you two... dating?" he asked suddenly.

Rose's eyes widened and she glanced at Scorpius, who looked back at her sideways. There was a long pause.

"I knew it!" Zane cried, pointing at the Shard.

Rose's face went red. "Don't be ridiculous. We're just friends. And we're both not even thirteen years old, if you recall."

"*Rose* has a *boyfriend*," Zane sang, grinning.

Scorpius rolled his eyes and climbed to his feet on the other side of the glass. "I have Runes homework," he stated in a bored voice, walking away.

"You're all idiots," Rose fumed, crossing her arms and refusing to make eye contact with the boys in the mirror.

"That may be," Zane nodded, still grinning, "but we're *perceptive* idiots. Aren't we?" He glanced back at James and Ralph. Ralph shook his head.

"I have Mug-Occ homework," he said, turning to his bed, which he threw himself on.

"See you later, Rose," James smiled. "I expect Scorpius could use some help with his Runes."

"Scorpius does just fine on his own," she muttered, standing up. "Let me know what else happens there, all right? And bring Lucy with you the next time you pop on. Maybe we'll get some *intelligent* conversation out of *her*."

As the final day of Ralph and James' first full week at Alma Aleron finally came around, James found himself looking quite forward to the weekend. Now that Merlin and Professor Longbottom had gone home and his parents and sister were busy getting themselves settled into their new flat, it was going to be James' first chance to enjoy a few days of freedom. There was still quite a

lot of the campus that he had not explored, including the inside of the Tower of Art, the strange ruin at the northern end of the campus, the massive sports stadium (known as Pepperpock Down), and the endless statues, fountains, and odd magical landmarks that dotted the grounds.

Lucy had promised to take the boys on a tour of Erebus Castle, home of Vampire House, but James was rather less interested in that, having already had Cursology class in the large glassed 'moonroom' of the castle and not particularly liking what he'd seen. Hogwarts castle was the real thing, of course. By comparison, Erebus Castle felt a bit like a Muggle movie set, with baroque chandeliers crammed into every available ceiling space, enormous, morbidly detailed tapestries hung from every stone wall, and far too many suits of armor, gaping fireplaces, and looming staircases. For her own part, Lucy seemed to have quickly come to love her house and her fellow Vampires, even befriending some of the girls whom they had first encountered aboard the *Gwyndemere*.

"Sure, they're all a little melodramatic and morose," she conceded at breakfast on Friday morning, "but they're really imaginative and intelligent. Felicia Devereau makes charcoal rubbings of the gravestones in the campus cemetery. And Druzilla Hemmings writes poetry. It doesn't rhyme or anything, but that just means it's really *good* poetry. Very grown-up."

"Yeah," Zane nodded critically. "And I hear the whole lot of them are making some new clothes for the emperor."

Lucy blinked at Zane, and then shook her head derisively.

"Wait a minute," Ralph said, frowning. "America has an emperor?"

The last class of the morning turned out to be Theoretical Gravity, which was apparently a strange mix of levitation, flight, and anything else that dealt with getting things off the ground. The class met in the center of a grassy quadrangle between the Tower of Art and the Administration Hall and James was delighted to see the Trans-Dimensional Garage pitched nearby, its canvas walls flapping in the breeze. The flying cars sat inside, their chrome glittering as the sun angled into the tent's open front.

"Is that the permanent home of the American side of the Garage?" James asked Zane.

Zane glanced back at the tent-like structure. "Yeah, I think the other side is somewhere in Pakistan right now. There's a team of wizarding archeologists there, digging up some old magical city. Professor Potsherd is always dragging his students all over the world, scratching around in the dirt like a bunch of beetles. In fact, beetles are all they brought back with them last time. Scarabs, actually, from Egypt. Pretty cool, now that I think of it. They're up in the museum on the top floor of the Tower of Art."

As Zane spoke, a figure strode out from beneath the huge trees at the edge of the quadrangle and James was surprised to recognize Oliver Wood, dressed in a short cape and boots with a pair of goggles pushed up over his eyebrows.

"Greetings students," he proclaimed, summoning them to gather around him in the sunlight. "Professor Asher is feeling a bit under the weather today, so I've been asked to fill in. I am given to understand that you are currently working on intermediate airborne traffic regulations, yes?"

There was a collective moan as the students slumped.

“Come on,” one of the Igor boys complained. “Asher’s sick. Can’t we do something other than aerial right-of-way drills? Let’s do a collective levitation!”

“Nosedive recovery practice!” a Zombie girl called. “From a thousand feet! It’s clear enough today!”

The class broke into a babble of unruly voices as Wood shook his head and raised his hands, palms out.

“Look, you lot, just because your professor’s sick, doesn’t mean we can just ignore the curriculum. He’ll be back next Friday... er... probably. Actually, maybe not, now that you mention it...”

“What’s he got?” the Igor student asked.

“I hear it’s witherwart,” a Vampire girl called out from the rear of the gathering. Everyone turned to look back at her. She blinked at them. “At least, that’s the rumor that’s going around. I don’t know anything about it. It isn’t like I cursed him with it just to put off my UP-DWN examination. Er, none of you can prove anything.”

“Either way,” Wood said, trying to regain control of the class, “it may, in fact, be that the professor could be absent for a few weeks. So...”

The class broke into a babble again, begging to be given a holiday from the regiment of flight regulations they had apparently been studying. Wood glanced over the students a bit helplessly, and then grinned.

“Fine,” he called out, silencing them nearly instantly. “We’ll run some laps on the Clutch course, just to warm up. After that, we’ll go over passing streams and confined space landing techniques.”

“Excellent,” Zane enthused as the class cheered, drowning out the second half of Wood’s statement. “We can get a little speed behind us up in the rings. It’s good timing too. The first Clutch match of the season is only a week away.”

“So what is Clutch anyway?” Ralph asked as the class followed Wood across the quadrangle, heading for the stadium parapets which were just visible over the roofs of Faculty Row. “Is it anything like Quidditch?”

“Not really,” Zane answered, cinching up the corner of his mouth thoughtfully. “Clutchcudgel is sort of a cross between broom racing and rugby. Basically, you have a series of floating rings that form a big figure eight in the air over the field. The point is to catch one of the three Clutches, which are just flying leather footballs, and then zoom three times through the course as fast as you can. On the last pass, you toss the Clutch through the goal over the middle ring.”

James shrugged. “Doesn’t sound too hard.”

“Nope,” Zane agreed. “Except for the Bullies. They’re the guys on the other team whose job is to force you out of the rings and make you forfeit the Clutch.”

Ralph nodded. "All right. But still, assuming you get past them, it's just a straight shot to the goal, right?"

Zane clapped Ralph on the shoulder. "Absolutely. Except for the Keeper. He carries a big wooden Cudgel, and he'll swat the Clutch right back at you if he can. Knock you right off your broom if you aren't careful. Bullies can carry Cudgels too, sometimes."

"And don't forget about the offensive and defensive spellwork," another boy called from nearby.

"Right you are, Heathrow," Zane replied. "The magic game is an essential part of the sport. Which is why the Zombies will rule the course this year."

"In your dreams, Walker," an Igor girl countered. "We'll clobber the lot of you at the first cross passage."

"Cross passage?" James asked, glancing aside at Zane, who waved a hand dismissively.

"Some of the Bullies will hang back during the first loop, just so they can meet you at the intersection and broadside you. You can usually duck under them, and most of them don't really have the guts to perform a true kamikaze."

"Team Igor has *plenty* of guts," the girl grinned wickedly. "We just got a refrigerated shipment of them last Wednesday."

"Gonna whip yourselves up a squad of Frankensteins who actually know how to fly a Clutch course?" Zane asked brightly. "Or are you just hoping to spawn some dates for the Halloween banquet?"

The girl fumed angrily but couldn't seem to come up with a sufficient retort. Zane dismissed her airily.

Shortly, the class entered the shadow of Pepperpock Down, which consisted of a series of tall grandstands surrounding a neatly cropped field. Two wooden gantries faced each other in the center of the field, each topped with a broad platform and hung with house banners. A scattering of students sat in the grandstands, soaking in the autumn sunlight or chatting in small knots. At ground level, a group of college-aged Werewolves ran exercise drills, their gray tee shirts and sweatpants dark with sweat. Wood led his class across the pitch toward a door in the base of the right gantry.

"Grab a broom, everyone," he called, heaving the large door open and revealing a low, dark locker room. "Let's not be choosy. I want to see you all on the platform in five minutes."

James and Ralph were among the last ones into the musty space. The room was embedded into the ground beneath the field and framed in stone, with a low wooden roof. More house banners decorated the inside walls, most quite old and dusty. Hundreds of brooms were hung on pegs or stashed in large quivers. Babbling noisily in the cramped space, the students chose a broom each and began climbing a set of narrow stairs that spiraled up through the ceiling.

"Whoa," Ralph said, nudging James and pointing. "Look at those!"

James whistled appreciatively as he moved toward a set of shelves beneath the stairs. “Are those brooms? I’ve never seen anything like *that* before.”

The objects lined neatly on the shelves were as long as brooms, but much flatter and wider, like fence planks that had been smoothed and polished. Their tails were streamlined and flattened, each bristle honed to a needle-like point. Some had been painted with garish designs and colors. They gleamed mellowly in the dusty light.

“Are we allowed to use these?” James asked, wide-eyed.

Ralph shrugged and grinned. “I don’t see why not. I’d ask Zane, but he was one of the first ones up to the platform. Come on, let’s give it a shot! They sure beat the house brooms back home!”

James nodded. Almost reverently, he picked up the closest of the strange brooms. It was painted glossy black with blue flames streaming from the front. Ralph took the one next to it, which was streaked with orange and black like a tiger’s stripes. Held upright, each broom was slightly taller than they were. After a moment’s admiration of themselves with their impressive brooms, both boys turned and followed the last of the class up into the open-air staircase.

A minute later, much out of breath, they climbed into the brightness of the platform high over the field. The grandstands didn’t seem so very tall anymore as they ringed the field. The campus sprawled away into the hazy distance, topped by the bell tower on the roof of Administration Hall, which was the only thing higher than the stadium platforms. Glittering in the air over the field, James saw the rings that formed the Clutchcudgel course. The one in the middle was larger than the others, and topped with a second ring, smaller and shining silver—obviously the goal ring. A line of pigeons perched atop of the goal ring, watching the students where they gathered on the platform.

“All right,” Wood said, clapping his hands together briskly. “Let’s stretch our legs a bit, shall we? Three warm-up laps should do the trick. This isn’t a competition, so let’s avoid passing each other. Leaders cross on top at the intersection, followers keep below. Understood? Then let’s be off.”

With a curt nod, Wood straddled his own broom and kicked off, bobbing up into the air and passing through the nearest of the floating golden rings. The thought of taking off from such a high perch gave James a vaguely queasy feeling, but none of the other students seemed the slightest bit nervous about it. Like dandelion seeds in a breeze, they streamed into the air, following Wood as he navigated serenely through the course.

“Well,” Ralph said, hefting his broom so that it bobbed next to him, “here goes nothing.”

Both boys attempted to straddle the oddly-shaped brooms and immediately found them rather uncomfortable and awkward.

“Is it just me,” Ralph said, bouncing on tiptoe toward the ledge of the platform, “or does something about this feel a little... backwards?”

Most of the rest of the class had already taken off, forming a long line that streamed through the rings, calling out chatter like birds on a telephone wire. Zane still stood on the edge of the platform, waiting his turn as the others launched ahead of him. He glanced back as James and Ralph hobbled into place behind him, and his eyes bulged.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” he hissed suddenly, alarmed. “What are you doing? Get off, quick, before anyone sees you!”

James blinked at his friend and then scrambled to get off of the odd broom. Ralph did the same, but seemed to be rather stuck. He tilted sideways, nearly falling off the broom onto the platform.

“You guys are lucky I’m the only one that saw that,” Zane rasped urgently. “If anyone else saw you *sitting* on a *skrim*...” He shook his head speechlessly.

“What?” James exclaimed in a hushed voice. “Wood said grab a broom! What’s wrong with these?”

Zane rolled his eyes and smacked a palm to his forehead. “These aren’t *brooms*!” he said, exasperated. “They’re *skrim*s! It’s an American thing! I mean, *look* at them!”

“So what’s the difference, exactly?” Ralph asked, annoyed.

“For one thing,” Zane replied, “you don’t straddle a *skrim*. You stand on it. For another thing, they’re designed specifically for Clutchcudgel matches, not regular flying around!”

James threw up his hands. “How were we supposed to know? They were right there in plain sight!”

Zane sighed, still straddling his own broom. “Well, I guess there’s no rule *against* using a *skrim* in class. It’s just not something anyone *does*.”

From across the open air of the course, Professor Wood’s voice called out. “Hurry it up, you three! We’re one lap down already.”

“They’ve got *skrim*s!” a girl cried incredulously. “I bet they don’t even know which end’s the front!”

There was a chorus of laughter as the line of students circled the platform, looping back toward the intersection. James watched and they watched him back, many of them smirking and shaking their heads. He glanced back at Zane, who shrugged and raised his eyebrows.

“Well, it’s your funeral, mate. Go for it.” With that, he kicked off himself, merging with the rest of the class.

“You aren’t serious,” Ralph asked in a low voice. “Are you?”

“Do they even *teach* flight at that poofy European school of yours?” one of the Werewolf students called out, grinning.

James set his face into a resolved frown, lifted his right foot and planted it onto the beam of the *skrim*. It bobbed slightly but remained steady.

“He’s going to try it!” a girl yelled. “He’ll plummet like a stone and bury himself in the field! Maybe he’ll take some of those Werewolf upperclassmen with him!” She laughed shrilly.

Ralph raised his own foot and placed it awkwardly onto the tiger-striped skrim. “I can’t help feeling like this is a really bad idea,” he muttered to himself.

“Buck up, mate,” James said. “At least it wouldn’t be our first sport-related disaster.”

Ralph glanced at him. “Last time I saved your bum. Who’ll save *us* this time?”

“Maybe we can save each other. Or maybe this time we won’t need any saving.”

“So how do we do this?” Ralph asked, swallowing hard.

James shook his head. “I think,” he said, steeling himself, “that you just don’t think about it.”

Before Ralph could respond, James drew a deep breath, coiled himself, and kicked off.

“Wait!” Ralph called out, but James was already gone. The skrim dipped sharply off the end of the platform, with James ducking low over it, and then, miraculously, it bobbed upwards again, wobbling wildly.

“He’s doing it!” a voice announced incredulously. “So far, at least. Look at him dance!”

“James!” Wood cried from across the bright distance. “That’s a skrim! What are you doing?”

“He’s fine!” the Werewolf boy called, grinning meanly. “Look at him! He’s a natural!”

There was a smattering of laughter. James struggled to keep his balance on the skrim as it bobbed and slithered beneath his feet, zigging out into the middle of the course. The field swayed far below, looking ridiculously distant and unforgivably hard. He gasped and nearly lost his balance. Instinctively, he closed his eyes, shutting out the sight and concentrating instead on keeping his balance. Amazingly, it worked. The skrim leveled out and ceased its terrible wobbling. James drew a deep breath, bent his knees a little, and relaxed his shoulders. Slowly, he slitted his eyes again, keeping them raised and refusing to look down. The line of broom-borne students strung out ahead of him, most looking back with curiosity and surprise.

“Well, I’ll be jiggered,” a fellow Bigfoot named Norrick announced, smiling. “Look at you, James! You’re doing it!”

“He’ll go over the side like a brick any moment now,” the Werewolf boy called, his grin faltering.

James didn’t *feel* like he was going to go over the side, however. In fact, the more he relaxed on the narrow beam of the skrim, the more he thought he understood the way the unusual broom worked. Unlike normal flight, operating a skrim was all about how he angled his feet and maneuvered his center of gravity. These were skills that had come naturally to him on the football field. Maybe the same thing that had made him good with the football would make him good at flying a skrim. Cautiously, he experimented with leaning forward, accelerating slightly. He angled around the student who flew in the rear, passing somewhat nervously. The student was a girl from

Pixie House, her streaming blonde hair tied in an immaculate ponytail. She frowned at him with disbelief.

“No passing, please,” Oliver Wood called from the opposite end of the course. James glanced aside at him as he flew, slowing slightly.

“Beginner’s luck,” the Werewolf boy proclaimed, looking back at James over his shoulder, his eyes narrowed. “Try that during a *real* match and see what happens.”

James ignored the boy. He glanced down at himself, surprised at how well he was doing. Some part of him had suspected that he might actually be able to manage himself on a skim. He hadn’t known why, but now he thought perhaps he did. Potters were born flyers. He’d never understood it before, but then again, he’d never been given the opportunity to fly like *this* before. It felt perfectly natural, as if the skim was simply an extension of his own body. Experimentally, he tried a little shimmy, and felt the board carve effortlessly back and forth beneath him, cutting the wind like a knife. He began to speed up again, passing the Werewolf boy.

“He’s gonna lap you, Pentz!” another boy called from across the course. “The newbie’s gonna show you up!” There was a hoot of laughter.

James saw the look in the boy’s eye a moment before the gray-gloved hand lanced out. The Werewolf boy, Pentz, meant to smack the skim as it passed him, knocking James off balance. Instead, his hand missed cleanly as James tilted his ankles, dodging momentarily out of the boy’s reach. Both of them blinked in surprise. Pentz’s face turned ugly, and he lunged out again, meaning to catch the end of James’ skim. James feinted away again, marveling at how easy it was. Pentz was growing furious. He lashed out again, lunging on his broom, and nearly rolled it over as James dipped down and away, grinning.

“Come back here!” Pentz hissed.

“Be careful,” James replied. “I’d hate to see you make a crater on the field. But then again, maybe you’d take out some of your housemates on the way.”

“No passing,” Wood called again. “This just a warm-up exercise, everyone.”

James glanced around once more, peering over his shoulder to see where the professor was.

“That’s right, Cornelius,” Pentz growled. “You can pass me when you’re on your way to the *dirt*.”

He lunged out once more, this time with both hands. His fingers closed on air, however, as James dodged up over the boy, and Pentz did roll over this time. He scrambled to grasp hold of his broom as it slewed back and forth, arcing out of the line of flyers. James swooped over Pentz easily, picking up speed. All around, students began to respond, laughing at Pentz as he struggled to right himself on his broom, but James barely heard them. He hunkered lower on the skim, still accelerating, and threaded through the flyers, now passing them one at a time.

The pure pleasure of flight was intoxicating. It filled him from head to toe, tingling like secret magic. This time, however, it wasn’t wizard magic. This was the pure and simple magic of discovering some innate, hidden talent and finally, wonderfully, finding the means to exercise it. He

leaned forward over the skim, driving it onward, following the line of flying students, beginning to swerve through them like pylons. He didn't hear Professor Wood calling out to him, nor did he hear Zane's hearty whoop of encouragement as James passed him, still accelerating.

This is what my dad felt, James thought happily. *The first time he sat on a broom and took it up into the sky, this is what he felt! It makes sense to me now! Now I understand the feeling!*

A nearly absurd sense of pride and delight welled up inside James, flooding his heart and tingling all the way down to his toes. He couldn't bear it any longer. Gently, instinctively, he leaned forward. The skim sped up, and this time James didn't hold it back. He leaned into the wind and dropped out of the rings of the Clutch course, angling out in a wide arc over the grandstands. Students peered up at him as he whooshed overhead, leaning so far over the flat of the skim that he curled his fingers over its tip, baring his face into the thundering force of the air. He couldn't bring himself to remain in the confines of the stadium, not when there was so much open air out over the rest of the sun-washed campus. With a whoop of joy and a wild lean, he spun off between the grandstands, angling out over the trees.

The bell tower of Administration Hall swayed before him and he aimed for it, slaloming back and forth on the air currents. The wind felt almost like a solid thing all around him. It was as if the faster he flew, the steadier the skim was beneath his feet, allowing him to lean dramatically from side to side with no sense of vertigo. The bell tower grew large with amazing speed and James swooped past it so closely that he saw his shadow flicker over the conical roof.

Instantly, he tucked and leaned, drawing the skim sideways into a tight corkscrew turn. James spiraled downwards and banked toward a cluster of huge pine trees. The air of his passage startled pigeons from the trees and dragged a wake of loose needles and twigs out behind him, forming a pine-scented trail into the sky.

He leaned over the skim again and dipped low over the blur of the campus. Students glanced up as he flashed overhead, pulling a shaft of wind behind him like an aftershock. Still he lowered so that his reflection raced him in one of the long pools that lined the mall. The gargoyle birdbath loomed ahead and James pulled sharply up at the last moment so that he shot through the spray of the fountain itself, exploding it into mist.

Laughing, he angled back again, rising and slowing, breathing a deep sigh of elated excitement. The campus unrolled beneath him until the stadium heaved into view once again, waiting for him. The rest of the class had finished their laps. They stood dumbstruck on the platform, holding their brooms at their sides, watching as James swooped expertly over them, lowering. Ralph and Zane stood on the edge of the platform, grinning madly and shaking their heads in wonderment. The small crowd opened beneath James, giving him room to touch down. Before the skim touched the platform, James jumped nimbly off it, landing easily and collecting the skim as it bobbed up alongside. He panted giddily, shook fountain water from his hair, and looked around at the class.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Wood called out sternly. James glanced around, and the smile dropped suddenly from his face. Wood's face was taut with severity. "I have exactly two questions

for you, young man. The *first* is what detention do you prefer? Writing lines or scrubbing bathroom floors?”

James’ face fell. “Er. Um,” he stammered. “Writing lines, I guess?”

Wood nodded slowly. “Writing lines it is. See me in my office this evening.”

James sighed. “Yes sir. Sorry. What’s your second question?”

Wood’s face turned very slightly thoughtful. James had the sudden sense that the professor was trying very hard to suppress a smile. In a more conversational tone of voice, he asked, “What size jersey do you wear?”

Here ends chapter ten. 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.