



12. GAME MAGIC

That evening, the Administration Hall cafeteria buzzed with the anticipation of the season's first Clutchcudgel match. As James waited in line with his tray, he looked around at the packed tables and milling students, most of whom were decked out in sweaters or scarves bearing their house colors, some even with their faces painted. Most prominently displayed, of course, were the acid green of the Igors and the autumn orange of the Bigfoots. To James' surprise, the Igors were apparently considered the stronger team, thus most of the other houses had donned the Bigfoots' orange and blue, rooting for the team that they believed would be an easier victory for their own teams when the time came.

Many upperclassmen and college-aged students had turned out in the cafeteria in preparation for the evening's match, showing just how seriously the population of Alma Aleron took the sport. Realizing this, James finally began to feel a stirring of nervousness. He ate very little and then excused himself quickly, darting alone back to Apollo Mansion to grab his jersey and glasses.

He hated wearing the black-framed spectacles most of the time, but tonight, being able to see at distance while navigating the figure eight course was going to be essential. One thing he'd learned during practices was that at skim speed, things that were far away got close very quickly. This was especially true at the intersection, where two directions of players passed at lightning speeds.

Apollo Mansion was completely deserted and as James left the building and heard the front door slam behind him, he felt a moment of panic. Was he late? Had the match already begun? He glanced up at the clock tower over Administration Hall and breathed a shallow sigh of relief. He had

thirty minutes. Simultaneously nervous and excited, James ran across the campus, heading toward the glow of the stadium parapets and the increasing roar of the crowd.

It had stopped raining, fortunately, but as evening descended, the sky was very low and dark, churning slowly and spawning a capricious, gusty wind. Leaves scarpered across the dark footpaths like startled ghosts, highlighting the eerily empty campus. When James turned the corner at Faculty Row and came in sight of Pepperpock Down, however, he stopped in surprise.

The stadium's high parapets glowed colorfully against the low purple sky, filled nearly to overflowing with a sea of gathering students, waving banners, and high, streaming flags. James gulped. What had he gotten himself into? If he had played on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, he might have been prepared for this. Now, the sight of all of those eager faces, those flapping, handmade banners, signs, and shaking pom-poms filled him with a sort of leaden terror. They were all waiting to see him fly a skim, to watch him score goals, or—always a possibility—to fail miserably and perhaps even fall to his doom. It was like his first time trying out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team, but this time with the entire school watching. If he failed this time, as he had on that day back during his first year at Hogwarts, then he'd never live it down, not in a million years.

He swallowed past a hard lump in his throat, listened to the roar and chant of the crowd, and considered abandoning the whole thing. He could run back to Apollo Mansion and pretend to be sick. It would be easy. The truth was he *felt* rather sick just staring up at those brightly lit parapets and milling, excited faces.

What finally got him going was the thought of his mum and dad. No matter what happened tonight, they would be proud of him. Especially his dad, who had been the youngest Seeker in Hogwarts history. Even if James only managed to stay on his skim throughout the match, Harry Potter, his father, would be proud of him. Thinking of this, James drew a deep shaking breath and, feeling as if he was walking to his own doom, struck off toward the glow of the stadium. Less than a minute later, he was swallowed up in the roar and momentum of the event and there was no looking back. After that, everything was nearly a blur.



“I thought maybe you'd given the whole thing up,” Zane announced, meeting James at the door in the base of Bigfoot team's designated wooden gantry. “I was prepared to find you hiding under your bed back in your dorm room. Me and Ralph were ready to come and drag you here.”

“I *told* you today that I wasn’t nervous,” James protested weakly, ducking through the doorway into the sunken locker cellar. The rest of Bigfoot team moved about inside, strapping on their leather wrist gauntlets and shoulder pads, spitting into their goggles and shining them up with the tails of their jerseys.

“That was then,” Ralph replied loudly, following James into the light and noise of the room. “When you left the caf, though, you were looking pretty tetchy.”

Zane nodded seriously. “It’s normal. Clutch is a brutal sport. Last year, Pixies’ best Clipper was knocked off his skim in the first twelve seconds of the first match! He got hit so hard that his boots landed in the announcer’s box, seventy feet away! No one can blame you for being worried.”

“You’re not helping, you know!” James commented, plopping onto a bench and pulling on his shin guards.

“I know,” Zane replied, plunking next to James on the bench. “Which is why I wanted to tell you an idea I had earlier today. It might just help get your mind in the right place.”

“He told me about it already,” Ralph nodded. “It’s... interesting.”

Across the low room, Oliver Wood called out, “Goggles tonight, everyone! The wind is picking up something fierce, and we don’t want anyone blinded by the mist. I’ll perform *Impervius* charms on the lenses once we’re all on the platform. Five minutes until warm-up laps!” He turned and clumped up the steps himself followed by several members of the team, who began singing the Bigfoot anthem in husky voices.

“Tell,” James said, lacing up his boots. “What’s your idea?”

“All right,” Zane said, leaning back and studying the low ceiling. “Last year, I had old Stonewall Jackson for Technomancy two-oh-two, which is the intermediate class between Intro to Technomancy and Advanced Applied Technomancy, which we’ve got this year.”

“Get to the Nexus doorway thing,” Ralph prodded.

“All right, so last year, Stonewall talked about how there are bunches of other dimensions, all packed together alongside ours like layers in a big giant cake. The attack on the Vault of Destinies got me thinking about it because, apparently, our Loom got switched around with one from some neighboring dimension, one that’s a lot like ours, but not *exactly* like it.”

“What’s this have to do with Clutch?” James asked, harried, as Ralph helped him shrug into his shoulder pads.

“Nothing,” Zane said, smiling crookedly. “That’s the point! Now pay attention. Back in Techno two-oh-two, Stonewall talked about the theory of this thing called the Nexus Curtain. He said that, theoretically, every dimension has a gate into a sort of middle world, where all the dimensions hook up and hold together, sort of like spokes meeting at the hub of a wheel. This middle place is called the World Between the Worlds. According to the theory, the Nexus Curtain can only be found and opened by someone who has a special key: something from one of those alternate dimensions. Those sorts of things are extremely hard to come by, though, which is why the Nexus Curtain is mostly just a theory and a legend at this point.”

“Interesting as this is,” James interrupted, standing and patting himself down, “I just don’t see the point. Why would anyone want to go to another dimension? This one has enough problems of its own, including surviving Clutchcudgel matches in the dark during a windstorm. Where’s my skim?”

“Right here,” Ralph nodded, handing James the blue skim with the painted-on flames that he had ridden on his first outing.

“Three minutes, Potter!” Norrick called as he pounded up the wooden steps.

“Here’s the point,” Zane said hurriedly, warming to the subject and following James toward the steps. “According to Jackson, somebody *did* find and open the Nexus Curtain once, somebody from this school, although it was a long time ago. His name was Professor Magnussen, and he apparently went through and never came back.”

James pulled his goggles on over his head and seated them awkwardly over his glasses. “Fascinating,” he said. “Good for him. Wish I was there with him right now.”

Zane rolled his eyes. “You’re not paying attention!” he said, punching James on his padded shoulder. “Whoever attacked the Vault of Destinies stole a thread from the foreign dimension’s Loom! It’s an object from another dimension! Don’t you see? It could be used to open the Nexus Curtain!”

James stopped on the stairs and looked back at Zane over his shoulder, his brow furrowed. “So whoever it was... they could have used the missing thread as a key and followed this Professor Magnussen bloke into... wherever he went? They could be... hiding there?”

Zane nodded, his eyebrows raised. “And if they did, then that would explain how the missing crimson thread vanished without any trace! No one’s been able to track it down or even sense the slightest hint of it ever since the night the Vault was attacked. That doesn’t make any sense at all with something that crazy magical *unless* they used it to escape into the World Between the Worlds! And if that’s what they did, then no one is ever going to find them there because no one else has any way of getting past the Nexus Curtain! No one except maybe us!”

“Zane has an idea!” Ralph rasped, smiling crookedly.

James looked from one boy to the other, his brow lowered. “You’re both completely daft,” he said wonderingly. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“Adventure!” Zane announced happily. “Honor, and mischief, and really wild stuff! And maybe saving the universe while we’re at it!”

“You can’t be serious!” James proclaimed, shaking his head. “My mum was right! You’re both suffering from delusions of grandeur! My dad, and your dad, Ralph, and Merlin and all the rest of the best witches and wizards from two countries are working on this mystery, and you two think that they need a trio of school kids to give them a leg up?”

Zane shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time,” he replied reasonably.

“If you recall,” James said impatiently, “the three of us failed miserably! We were supposed to *prevent* Merlin’s return back during the Hall of Elders’ Crossing, and instead we completely fell into Madame Delacroix’s trap! We just got lucky because Merlin ended up being good! More or less. The world would probably be a lot better off if we had left everything well enough alone!”

Ralph looked worriedly thoughtful, but Zane was unperturbed. “Worked though, didn’t it?”

“*What* worked?” James asked, exasperated.

Zane smiled. “You’re not worried about Clutch anymore. Now go! You’ll do excellent.”

James rolled his eyes, turned, and ran up the steps, following the last of his teammates.



The rest of the night happened so fast, so breathlessly, that James could barely keep up with it. His clearest memory was of standing in the darkness of the platform, looking out over the brightly lit parapet grandstands and hearing the ringing roar of the gathered crowds. Banners snapped in the wind as a misty rain began to fall again, making the platform shine as if it was coated with oil.

“Huddle up, team,” Wood shouted over the damp wind. “It’s the first match of the season, so let’s take it easy out there. I want to see a solid, textbook match, just like we’ve been practicing. Begin with swallow formation, Bullies in front. Mukthatch, you’ll start as Keeper, but be prepared to switch with Gobbins if they stack their Clippers. Got it?”

The team grunted in understanding. Next to James, Mukthatch the Bigfoot nodded his shaggy head and barked a guttural woof of agreement. Wood looked around at the gathered faces, his expression tense, and then stuck out his right hand, palm down. As one, the rest of the team piled their right hands on top of his, Mukthatch last, his great furry-knuckled fingers as big as bananas.

“GooOO FEET!” the team cried in unison, and then broke away, clutching their skrim. In the lead, Jazmine Jade dropped her skim, stepped easily onto it, and kicked off into the darkness. The rest of the team began to follow her, forming the one-two chain of swallow formation.

James pressed his lips together tightly, swept his damp hair out of his face, and then strode toward the edge of the platform. His heart was pounding as he dropped his skim next to him. He'd done this dozens of times now, albeit never in the rainy dark, and never with so many people watching. The crowd cheered loudly, echoing in the mist all around, but James ignored them. He nodded to himself, planted his right foot onto the smooth flat of his skim, and kicked off.

The team circled sedately through two laps of the figure eight course, merging gradually with the members of Igor team, whose short green cloaks flapped wetly in the wind.

"Hey Cornelius," an older Igor boy called, swinging comfortably alongside James on his long silvery skim. James had learned, after several confusing interactions, that 'Cornelius' was a generic American term for anyone with an English accent, based on a series of famous speeches given by former Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge some decades earlier. "I hope you aren't too attached to that board of yours," the boy said, grinning meanly. "I plan on splitting it in two before the night's out."

"You'll have to catch me first," James replied lamely, avoiding the boy's eyes.

"You'll want to keep an eye peeled when you cross at the intersection," the boy nodded smugly. "I'll be the one meeting you there, and I won't be playing nice. Igors play for keeps."

James grimaced, glancing down at the dark field far below. "I'll keep that in mind."

As the final warm-up lap completed, both teams had spread throughout the rings of the course, mixing and assembling into their beginning formations. Mukthatch hovered on his skim over the middle ring, crouched and ready with his Cudgel held before him, guarding the goal ring, which glowed faintly in the darkness. The Igor Keeper, a rangy girl with a round, freckled face, flexed her knees on her own skim, watching Mukthatch out of the corner of her eye.

Flying on a standard broom outside of the course, the match official, Professor Sanuye in a black and white striped tunic, raised a whistle to his mouth. As Jazmine and the Igor team captain crossed the center ring, Sanuye blew his whistle, announcing the start of the match. Three leather balls, the Clutches, spiraled up into the air from three different directions, and the teams instantly fell upon them in an explosion of motion.

James was starting the match in the position of Clipper, but by the time he propelled his skim through the center ring, all three Clutches had already been collected. He glanced around, crouching low over his skim, and saw that Norrick had collected one of the Clutches. The other two had been claimed by Igor team. Grimly, James sped up, meaning to catch the Igor Clippers and try his best to knock them out of the rings, thus forcing them to relinquish the Clutches. He was no longer nervous or worried, nor was he afraid of falling off his skim and embarrassing (or killing) himself. Now, all that mattered was the match. James became lost in the blur of the rings, the whoosh and buffet of the air as he passed by the other players, and the smack and thump as riders collided and spun away into the darkness.

At first, the intersection seemed dreadfully frightening, but soon James came to anticipate it, throwing a darting glance toward the crossing stream to see who might be coming to meet him while he prepared to dodge or feint around them. Eventually, in fact, he saw how he could use the

intersection to his advantage, using his speed and maneuverability in a strategic manner. As the match progressed, James began to throw in little false maneuvers to trick the opposing offense into flying off course or cause them to ram into each other. Dimly, he was aware of the applause of the crowd as he performed these moves, but it seemed far away and unimportant.

By the third quarter, James had grown confident enough to go on the offensive. During one cross passage, he leaned hard on his skim, performing a perfect barrel roll, so that when he passed through the ring, he was completely upside-down. The passing Igor Clipper was so stunned by the move that James was able to easily jab out his hand, punch the Clutch from beneath the boy's arm, and catch it as it lobbed into the air on the other side. All around, the crowd cheered wildly, leaping to their feet and stomping raucously. Protecting the Clutch with both arms, James swept easily through the course the requisite three times, avoiding the Igor Bullies, and finally lobbed the Clutch toward the goal ring. The Igor Keeper lunged for it with her Cudgel, missing only barely, and James threw both hands into the air, celebrating his first goal along with the grandstands all around.

By the fourth quarter, however, James realized that Bigfoot team was trailing the Igors by a score of forty-six to twenty-nine. This was not because the Igors were better players, necessarily, but because of the very thing that Zane had warned about. Magic was allowed in the sport of Clutchcudgel and the Igors used it quite liberally. James saw them casting defensive spells, such as turbulence pits, Lanyard Charms, and gravity wells, and offensive spells, like inertia enhancers, speed hexes, and accuracy charms. The Bigfoots, on the other hand, used almost no magic whatsoever. James had his wand with him, encased in the leather sleeve sewn into the lining of his gauntlet, but he had no idea what to do with it, not knowing any of the spells he saw the Igors casting.

Finally, as the match neared its end, James grew desperate enough to perform one of the spells that he had learned during his earlier school years. As he circled the course, he noticed an Igor Bully preparing to cast a Lanyard Charm on Jazmine Jade, intending to use it to yank one of the Clutches out of her hands. James sped up, hunkered over his skim, and swept his own wand from the sheath in his gauntlet.

"Expelliarmus!" he cried, aiming for the Igor boy's outstretched wand. Instantly, the wand sprang from the boy's fist and spun off into the misty night. The crowd responded with a shocked outburst and a whistle pierced the air nearby.

"Penalty!" Professor Sanuye called out, swooping in on his broom. "Team Bigfoot, non-approved magic. Two minutes in the dock."

Shaking his head in confusion, James circled out of the course and flew toward the platform. Oliver Wood met him there, scowling.

"What was that all about?" the professor demanded as James hopped off his skim.

"Magic!" James exclaimed angrily. "The other team is using it! Why aren't we?"

Wood grabbed James' skim as it bobbed into the air. "We don't play that kind of match, James!" he said sternly. "We're a team of solid fundamentals and textbook formations. Nothing unsportsmanlike. We may not always win, but we walk away knowing we played a fair match."

Besides, that was a *dueling* spell, not approved Clutchcudgel game magic! You're lucky you didn't get ejected from the match, and me along with you!"

"It was just a Disarming Spell," James fumed, turning away. "Besides, I might as well *be* ejected. The match will be over before my dock time is over."

Wood sighed, looking out over the match as it sped through its final moments. "I give you points for enthusiasm, James, but you'll need to learn some self-control. We Bigfoots pride ourselves on a clean game. If you can't abide by that, then no amount of flying skills will make up for it."

James simply looked aside at the professor, speechless. Less than a minute later, the final whistle blew and Sanuye raised his wand, summoning the Clutches. Bigfoot team had lost the match by a score of forty-eight to thirty. Both teams broke up and circled around, heading toward their respective gantry platforms while the crowd cheered and jeered amiably from the grandstands all around.

James stepped forward, took his skrim from Professor Wood, and without waiting for his teammates, began to tromp down the stairs to the locker room below.



"But magic is *allowed* in Clutchcudgel!" James exclaimed some hours later, sitting in the corner booth of the Kite and Key along with Ralph, Zane, and several of his fellow Bigfoot teammates. "What's Wood want to hobble us for by banning us from using something that's legal?"

"*Expelliarmus* spells aren't legal," Jazmine Jade grumped, her chin resting on her forearms.

"Yeah," Norrick agreed. "And we *do* use *some* magic. Wood used *Impervius* charms on our goggles, for one."

"We're allowed to use Gummy-Glove Charms when we're carrying the Clutch," Harold Gobbins added. "And Slipstream Hexes to keep our skrim steady on the course."

“Those hardly count at all,” James insisted. “Team Igor was using *serious* spellwork out there tonight! Some of that stuff I’ve never even heard of!”

Jazmine sat up. “Makes sense. They have their own sport-magic coach whose job is to come up with all new Clutch spells. They have to get approved by the match official, but they pretty much always get a pass, so long as they don’t hurt anyone.”

“It’s true,” Zane said. “Team Zombie’s magic coach came up with a new one last year that froze a player’s skrim in midair. Granted, the player was probably going to fall off once his skrim jerked to a stop beneath him, but that wasn’t the spell’s fault. We got away with it until that playoff match where half of the players from both teams got into a pileup crash around a frozen skrim. It was hilarious!”

James narrowed his eyes in disbelief. “Hold on. You mean if I had just *told* Sanuye before the match that I wanted to use an *Expelliarmus* spell for defense, it would’ve been legal?”

Wentworth Paddington frowned and pushed his large glasses up on his nose. “The official Clutch commission doesn’t like players using dueling spells during matches,” he said with a sniff. “But there are ways to get around it. There’s the Knuckler, for instance.”

“Makes the opposing player’s hand spasm and drop anything they’re holding,” Jazmine explained. “Works on wands, Clutches, whatever.”

Zane nodded enthusiastically. “And don’t forget the Bonefuse Hex. Works just like *Petrificus Totalus*, but only on selected areas of the body. Aim for the other guy’s arm and he won’t be able to do anything with it for five minutes, at least.”

James was shaking his head in exasperation. “So basically there’s a Clutch-approved version of any sort of spell, with new ones being created all the time. Is that it?”

Jazmine pressed her lips together and nodded. “Yeah, that’s pretty much it.”

James flopped back in the booth seat. “So who’s the Bigfoot magic coach, then? I want to have a word with him.”

“Wood, I guess,” Wentworth answered uncertainly. “Anyone want the rest of my Butterbeer? I can only drink half or else I get the hiccups all night long.”

“Right here, Went,” Gobbins announced, sitting up in his seat and reaching for the smaller boy’s bottle. “I’ll teach you how to put away a drink.”

Wentworth looked offended. “I can put away a drink just fine. It’s Butterbeer I can’t take much of. I’m on a special diet, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Norrick sighed, rolling his eyes. “We know all about it. Yeats hasn’t cooked an onion in the mansion ever since you arrived. Makes liver night pretty pathetic. That’s why everyone eats in the caf on Fridays, even the upper classes.”

“I can’t help it,” Wentworth mumbled, crossing his arms. “Onions break me out in hives. Garlic’s even worse. You don’t have to rub it in.”

“Maybe rubbing it in would cure you,” Ralph suggested, raising his head. “Have you ever tried it? Rub some onions and garlic all over you, sort of like a vaccination!”

“Add a little butter and you got yourself a new Friday night dinner option,” Zane nodded. “Grilled Pastington patties for all!”

“Hah hah,” Wentworth said dourly. “It’s a serious medical condition. You don’t even know.”

James finished his Butterbeer and stood up, announcing his intention to go have a talk with Wood about the team’s woeful lack of a magic game. On his way toward the door, he saw Albus and Lucy seated at a nearby table, watching a group of older students play an incomprehensible table game called Wizard Foosball. Tiny ceramic men spun on metal rods embedded into the sides of the recessed table, operated by leather-wrapped handles. A small white ball bounced and clacked over the field encased in the table’s walls, kicked by the spinning figures. As James passed the table, one of the players spun the rod violently and the ball popped up out of the table. James caught it deftly.

“Nice catch, Cornelius,” one of the upperclassmen players called out. “Still got your game face on, eh?”

James glanced back at them and saw the young men smiling at him amiably, nodding with something like grudging approval.

“Give the ball back!” one of the tiny ceramic players cried in a squeaky voice. The others joined in, jeering raucously. James tossed the ball back to the man who’d spoken to him. The man caught it easily but didn’t turn away.

“You did good out there tonight, Potter,” the man said. James noticed that he was wearing the orange and blue striped sweater of a Bigfoot college student, most of whom lived in the rowhouses behind the theater. “Don’t let Wood hold you back, eh?”

James tilted his head at the older boys. “Any of you know why Wood doesn’t use any serious magic in the Bigfoot Clutch matches?”

The college students exchanged glances, smiling crookedly. Finally, the one in the Bigfoot sweater said, “Wood’s a decent guy, don’t get me wrong. Word is, he left his guts back on the Quidditch pitch in jolly old England, that’s all.”

The other men laughed and shook their heads. A moment later, they returned to their game.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” a voice said softly nearby. James glanced aside and saw Lucy and Albus moving next to him. “You came close to winning tonight, even without all that fancy magic.”

“Nice flying out there, big brother,” Albus agreed reluctantly. “I tried out for Team Werewolf, but they just laughed at me. Said that only true-blood Americans get to fight on behalf of Werewolf House.”

“That’s awful,” Lucy frowned. “*And* against school policy.”

“Not when it comes to Clutch,” Albus shrugged. “Every house gets to make their own rules about who can be on the team as well as how often they practice, what gear they wear, all that kind of thing. I did sneak out to the field and try out one of those skrimps. Let’s just say I won’t be

pushing the issue with my new mates. I *did* make the Werewolf Quidditch Team, though, mainly because they were a man short after their best Beater graduated last year. I'll be facing off against your mate Zane this coming Thursday night. Mum, Dad, and Lil are coming."

James glanced at his brother as they drifted toward the rear entrance of the Kite and Key. "Did you see them tonight?"

"Yeah, didn't you?" Albus replied. "They sat with me in the Werewolf grandstand. Mum covered her eyes most of the time, saying she couldn't bear to look. Dad had his wand in his hand through the whole match, twitching it every time you went through the intersection, like he was ready to jump up and levitate you at any moment if you decided to fall off your skim. He was grinning, though, that mad grin he gets when he watches Quidditch matches back home. You know. Like part of him wants to put on the pads, grab a broom, and jump out there with the team."

James couldn't help smiling at the thought. "I know what you mean. Are they still here?"

Lucy shook her head. "Your father got some sort of message through his own Shard. His is smaller. He keeps it wrapped up in his robes all the time, just so he never misses anything. After he got the message, he and Aunt Ginny and Lily left right away. They asked me to tell you hello and that they are proud of you."

"They asked *me* to tell him that," Albus said, turning to Lucy, who avoided his eyes.

"There's this thing called double redundancy," she explained carefully. "They thought you'd forget."

Albus rolled his eyes. "I didn't forget. I just didn't remember it until you brought it up. Nobody can blame me if you beat me to it."

"I'm heading back to my house," James announced, pushing open the heavy wooden door. "I'm completely beat."

Lucy followed him out into the misty darkness. "I'll walk with you for the first bit," she said. "I'm heading back to the castle. I have Magi-American History in the morning, and I still have some reading to do for it."

James grunted amiably and struck off along the footpath next to Lucy. After a moment, she spoke again.

"For a giant, that Professor Bunyan is one sharp bloke, isn't he?"

James shrugged. "I guess. Seems like he comes from a completely different tribe of giants, doesn't it?"

"He says he isn't part of a tribe at all. He says he just grew big because when he was a lad he ate twenty chickens and fifteen dozen eggs a day."

"And drank the milk of ten cows and swam laps around Lake Erie for exercise until the whole lake turned into a giant whirlpool," James nodded, smiling. "You believe any of that?"

Lucy shook her head. "I think those are what the Americans call 'tall tales'. They're sort of like a mix between a myth and a legend."

"I like the one about the magic fog that sprang up around George Washington and his little army of farmers and kids back during the war for independence; the one that hid them from all those huge British warships that were looking for them."

"I think that one was true," Lucy suggested uncertainly. "Although it's hard to know what's myth and fact about the Americans' history. So much of it seems so... unreal."

James raised his eyebrows in the darkness as they walked. "I don't know about history, but it still feels pretty unreal to me, even now."

Lucy laughed, but there was something odd about the sound of it. James glanced aside at her.

"What's up with you, Lu?" he asked.

She looked at him, and then glanced quickly away. "Nothing. What do you mean?"

James looked out over the campus. "We passed the footpath to Erebus Castle back there by the Octosphere, you know."

Lucy gazed back the way they'd come. "You're right," she agreed. "Silly me. Er, I guess I'll head back then. Goodnight James."

James watched as Lucy smiled at him in the darkness, and then turned and ran back along the wet footpath. Her black hair bounced around her shoulders and shone in the light of a nearby lamppost. When she reached it, she glanced back, saw him watching, and stopped.

"You did really well tonight," she called out after a moment's pause. "I was proud of you for trying to use magic even if it did get you into trouble."

James blinked at her. He opened his mouth to thank her, but before he could, she spun on her heels and ran into the darkness, following the narrow flagstone path to Erebus Castle. James closed his mouth again and watched Lucy's silhouette vanish into the shadow of the trees. What in the world had gotten into her? Shaking his own head, he turned and walked the rest of the way to Apollo Mansion.

He was exhausted and a little frustrated, but he was also filled with a certain giddy contentment. He had done well tonight. His mum and dad were proud of him. And he had succeeded in playing for his House Clutch team while Albus had not. That last was a petty satisfaction, but it was satisfaction nonetheless. All that remained was the perplexing mystery of Professor Wood's reluctance to use serious magic in Clutch matches, but James thought he could probably work that out. Even now, remembering the conversation he'd had with the professor some days earlier, he thought he could begin to grope around the edges of it. It was still hazy, but it had something to do with earning the respect of his dead parents, and maybe even himself. It was complicated, and a little mad, but it made a certain backward logic. If using battle magic had earned Wood the shame of his parents, then perhaps he felt that avoiding it now, even in something as basic as a Clutch match, would help him regain their ghostly approval.

James shook his head. Being a grownup was such mad, complicated business. He was glad that he was still, technically at least, a kid.



Over the course of the following weeks, James never did speak to Professor Wood about the flaws of Team Bigfoot's Clutchcudgel magic game. Instead, he studied the small grey rulebook that Wood had given him for his line-writing assignment, particularly the chapter entitled *Offensive and Defensive Spellwork Fundamentals*. There, he learned the essential magic associated with the game, including much of what he'd seen during the year's first match against Igor House.

As the season progressed, James studied the magic games of the other House teams and found that each house approached their Clutchcudgel magic in a distinct and different manner.

The Igors' team, for instance, used conventional Clutch spells most of the time, but occasionally surprised everyone with a spectacularly creative magical effort, often involving several players working in tandem. Such attempts failed as often as not, but they were always exciting to watch and the crowd always cheered the Igors' bloody-minded grandiosity.

Team Pixie, on the other hand, relied on endless variations of entirely original sport magic, mostly designed by Mother Newt herself. Pixie Clutch magic was almost always pretty, sparkly, and effectively devastating, such as when the team captain, a girl named Ophelia Wright, enchanted the tail of her skim to produce a stream of tiny rainbow-colored butterflies. The butterflies were admittedly beautiful, if rather fat and clumsy, so that as the opposing players flew into Ophelia's wake, they found themselves peppered with hundreds of splattering, colorful collisions, mucking up their uniforms and pasting over their goggles.

James spent an inordinate amount of time in the campus library, looking up classic Clutchcudgel magical strategies, often with Zane and Ralph alongside him. Secretly at first, James began to practice the offensive and defensive spells he was learning, using the bust of Sir Pepperpock

in his dormitory room as a target. Often, Rose, Scorpius, and even Damien Damascus and Sabrina Hildegard would watch James' efforts via the Shard on the back of his dormitory room door.

"You're still emphasizing the second syllable of the Lanyard Charm," Rose announced critically on one occasion. "It's causing it to pull short too soon."

"And more twist in the wrist," Damien added, mimicking the move with his own wand on the other side of the Shard. "See? You're looking for a nice spiral. Keeps your aim true."

James ran his forearm across his brow. "Don't you lot have homework to do?"

"You forget that it's a lot later here," Rose sniffed. "We're only staying up because you're so endlessly entertaining. It's better than telly."

"Do the gravity well again," Sabrina suggested brightly, the quill bobbing in her hair. "I read that people who are really good at it can make one so strong that even light can't escape it! It's like a little miniature black hole!"

Ralph was lying on his bed surrounded by a collection of quills, parchments, and snacks. Glancing up from his Magi-American History textbook, he asked, "How do you all know so much about Clutchcudgel anyway?"

"Library," Rose shrugged. "There's not a whole lot there, but we found a few old magazines that talk about it. Apparently, there *is* a Clutch league in England, although hardly anyone's ever heard of it. I read an interview with the man who runs the league. He's rather... intense. But there was some good discussion of the basic magic that goes along with the game. Have you been practicing that Whistle-Whoopsie Hex Damien came up with?"

"I *told* you," James said, lowering his wand, "we're not allowed to use spells that hurt other players. Making the referee swallow his own whistle is a pretty obvious penalty."

"Can't be a penalty without a whistle blow," Zane mused from his lounge on James' bed. "Right? If a foul is committed but there's no whistle to call it, is it really a foul?"

"That's what I've been trying to say!" Damien exclaimed from the other side of the Shard.

"Forget it," James announced firmly. "I'm not risking getting put in the dock again."

"You mind if I steal that Whistle-Whoopsie bit, then?" Zane asked brightly. "I bet Warrington could put it to good use."

James rolled his eyes. On the other side of the Shard, Damien Damascus pointed a finger. "I've got patent pending on that one, Walker! Don't you go stealing it and calling it your own!"

"Wouldn't dream of it," Zane said in a wounded voice.

By the third match of the season, James had finally grown confident enough to attempt some real Clutch magic during the game. He waited until the fourth quarter of the match against Vampire House and, when he was sure Professor Wood was busy calling out formations, attempted a Lanyard Charm on the Vampire Clipper ahead of him. It worked perfectly. The Clutch popped

instantly from beneath the boy's arm and bobbed backwards in the air. James caught it against his chest, surprised and delighted at how simple it had been.

The crowd responded with a rather surprised cheer, and as James zoomed through the intersection and around the Bigfoot platform, he saw Wood glancing around curiously, looking to see what the crowd was applauding. As James neared the end of his requisite three laps, he saw that two of the Vampire Bullies had assembled ahead of him, preparing to fall upon him and force him out of the course. James narrowed his eyes and raised his wand.

“*Cresco Gravitatis!*” he called, aiming for a point between and below the two Vampire Bullies.

There was a very satisfying noise, rather like a reverse popping sound, and the two Bullies were sucked downwards, out of the course. They collided with each other at the point of the gravity well and James was pleased to notice as he swooped past that the air seemed very slightly darker around the center of the spell. The well collapsed upon itself quickly, but there was no chance that the two Vampire Bullies would catch James now. He banked hard around the last loop, speeding up and crouching low over his skrim, and lobbed the Clutch easily through the goal, keeping it well out of the range of the Vampire Keeper's Cudgel.

The crowd responded with a concussive roar of applause, as surprised as they were impressed. James had harbored hopes that Wood might not have noticed his use of game magic, but this hope was neatly dashed by the echoing voice of the match announcer, a Zombie House girl named Cheshire Chatterly.

“*And* the Bigfoot magic game takes a rather shocking leap into the twenty-first century with the skillful hexwork of number twenty-two, James Sirius Potter!” she cried, her voice amplified over the roar of the crowd. “Could it be that this hearkens a new era of competitiveness for Bigfoot House? Only time will tell. In the meantime, three cheers for Professor Oliver Wood and his very effective coaching!”

James slowed as he glanced up at the announcer's box, frowning. He was unsurprised to see Zane seated in the box alongside Cheshire Chatterly. The blonde boy grinned and waved down at James, winking, the gesture about as subtle as a giant in a tutu. James tried to avoid Wood's gaze but couldn't help glancing aside as he circled the platform. Wood was smiling rather tightly as the crowd cheered him.

“Nice one, James!” Norrick called, passing James on his own skrim. “Keep an eye out, though. Team Vampire will probably ambush you now since they think you're the only one with any magic game.”

James sighed as he crouched over his skrim, accelerating into the intersection. Sure enough, several Vampire players were eyeing him darkly as they swooped ahead.

“Why don't *you* try some magic then, Norrick?” James suggested, raising his voice into the rushing wind. “It's not illegal, you know!”

“I don't even *know* those spells!” Norrick responded. “That was a gravity well! Those are really tough!”

James was about to tell Norrick that they really weren't all that tough, but by then the two of them were zooming into the intersection and he lost sight of the other boy as they flashed and banked through the oncoming stream.

James didn't attempt any more magic during that match, which they lost by a score of fifty-seven to fifty. When it was over, he waited in the locker cellar below the gantry to see if Wood meant to chastise him. The rest of Team Bigfoot congratulated him heartily as they changed out of their pads and gear, but when Wood came down the stairs, they quieted immediately, watching, along with James, to see what he would say. Wood eyed the unnaturally quiet locker cellar for a long moment, letting his gaze sweep over the assembled players.

Finally, he cleared his throat and said, "Good match today, everyone. Well-played. We haven't seen such a close score in a long time. Carry on."

James watched as the professor made his way toward the exit. When the wooden door clapped shut, he let out a deep exhale of relief. For whatever reason, Wood had obviously chosen not to coach the team to perform any serious game magic, but he was apparently willing to allow it if James, at least, took the initiative upon himself. James felt a great weight of worry lift from his shoulders.

"Hey James," Wentworth said, plopping down next to him on the bench, "think you could teach me some of that stuff you did today?"

"Yeah," Gobbins agreed, keeping his voice low. "Me too. I don't know about the rest of these mokes, but I liked what you did out there today. Hell with tradition. I want to hex some heads."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," James said, raising his hands. "I just learned that stuff myself from books. Wood may let me get away with it on my own, but if he finds out I'm teaching the rest of the team to do it..."

"It's not the rest of the team," Wentworth said, wiping his glasses on his jersey. "It's just me and Gobbins."

"And me," Jazmine Jade added, sitting down on James' other side.

"Wurfh," another voice grunted. James glanced up to see Mukthatch nodding down at him, his black eyes twinkling.

James ran both hands through his hair in frustration. "Look, I'm not a teacher. I barely know those spells myself! I just read up on them, watched what everybody else did, and practiced in my room until I was ready to try it!"

"And you did all this *without* telling us?" Wentworth said reproachfully.

"No, no, it's better that way," Gobbins said enthusiastically. "Saves us all the trouble! Now he can just teach us what he knows!"

"I can't teach anybody anything!" James rasped, trying to keep his voice low.

"Why not?" Jazmine asked reasonably.

James shook his head and pursed his lips, at a loss for how to respond.

“Rharrf whubfle,” Mukthatch said, giving James an encouraging shove on the shoulder, nearly bouncing his head off the wall.

“Muk’s right,” Wentworth said. “We’re your teammates and your friends. It won’t be like you’re taking over Wood’s job or anything. Think of it as... helping us out with our homework.”

“Yeah,” Gobbins grinned. “Our Clutch homework.”

Jazmine nodded seriously. “We’d help *you* with *your* homework, James.”

“You didn’t the other night!” James spluttered, turning on Jazmine. “When I asked you to help me with my Precognitive Engineering essay!”

“You didn’t want *help* with it,” Jazmine replied, rolling her eyes. “You wanted to buy mine from last year. That’s hardly the same thing.”

Gobbins shook his head. “I *told* you she wouldn’t part with it for less than twenty Jacks.”

Wentworth stuck stubbornly to the issue. “So, will you help us learn some Clutch magic, James? Just us four?”

James looked from face to face and finally let out a long sigh of resignation.

“Woohoo!” Gobbins announced, throwing his fists into the air. “When do we start?”

“No time like the present,” Jazmine suggested. “It’s still early. We can meet in the attic common room. Nobody uses that room since Bump the Poltergeist moved into it. He won’t bother us, though, as long as nobody minds having a few books thrown at them. Might even help. It’ll give us something to aim at.”

James leaned forward and stripped off his Clutch boots, letting the conversation roll on without him. Secretly, he wasn’t all that upset about the prospect of teaching what he’d learned to a few other players, so long as it wasn’t the entire team. He might still earn the ire of Professor Wood, but for the moment, James’ aversion to getting into trouble was slightly outweighed by his desire to win at least one Clutch match this season. By the time he and his teammates left the cellar and struck off into the twilight of Pepperpock Down, he was already planning what he’d teach them first.

“Sorry guys,” James said to Ralph and Zane as they caught up to him. “No Butterbeers in the Kite and Key tonight. I’ve been commandeered.”

“We figured,” Zane nodded, sighing. “You gonna teach your team the old magical twenty-three skidoo?”

“Shh!” James hissed, looking around. “Not the whole team. Just a couple of my mates. Keep it a secret, all right?”

“All right,” Zane agreed, throwing up his hands as Mukthatch loomed menacingly over him. “Cool your jets, Chewbacca. Your secret’s safe with me. But keep in mind, next week, you lot are up against Zombie House. Magic is their middle name.”

“Yeah?” Wentworth countered, pushing himself up to his full height. “Well, Team Bigfoot’s middle name is... er...”

“Big?” Jazmine suggested hopefully.

“Big magic,” Gobbins nodded. “Thanks to James here. Our new magic coach.”

The rest of the Bigfoots agreed heartily, cheering and clapping James on the back.

Zane shook his head and rolled his eyes, smiling ruefully. “My hero,” he said, nudging James with his elbow.

James grinned sheepishly.

Thus finishes chapter twelve. 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.