



13. THE OCTOSPHERE AND THE ARBITER

The semester unrolled like a carpet.

James spent a few nights each week teaching Clutch magic to his new friends under the canted ceiling of the attic common room. Bump, the house poltergeist, was quite different than what James had expected. Unlike Peeves, whose gleeful mischief and imp-like appearance were Hogwarts legend, Bump was barely a wisp of human-shaped smoke and a vague scent of mold. His primary method of communication was a variety of sneezes, wheezes, annoyed moans, and the occasional hacking cough.

“Sounds like the ghost of someone who died of the sniffles,” Ralph had commented, a little put off by the roaming, cranky specter.

“It’s a good theory,” Wentworth agreed. “We thought the same thing, so we had him tested. Some teeny old lady from the Medical College came over and took an ecto-sample. According to her, Bump’s a poltergeist, through and through.”

“She sure *was* teeny, wasn’t she?” Jazmine concurred. “Her glasses were bigger than her head. I think she had some dwarf somewhere in her family tree.”

Gobbins poked his wand toward Bump, who moaned irritably and snaked off toward the bookshelf. “She said that there wasn’t much point in checking, really,” he added. “She said that there hasn’t been a real, bonafide ghost at the Aleron for decades.”

“Really?” James asked, curious. “Hogwarts is full of them. One of them used to be our History teacher. Why aren’t there any here?”

Wentworth shrugged where he sat by the door in an old high-backed easy chair. “Nobody knows. Maybe because of the Timelock. Maybe ghosts just can’t keep up with the way the campus roams all over the centuries every day.”

“But there *used* to be ghosts,” Gobbins countered. “A long time ago. I’ve heard stories about them. Percival Pepperpock was one of ’em even. And that old janitor, Freddie something or other. He was always trying to scare people, but he insisted on wearing this old stripey sweater and fedora hat, which is pretty hard to pull off even if you *aren’t* trying to be all spooky.”

“So what happened to all the ghosts then?” Ralph asked.

Jazmine shook her head. “Like Went said, nobody knows for sure. Maybe they just don’t make ghosts like they used to, eh?”

Mukthatch grunted and barked, anxious to get on with the lesson.

Things went well enough and James’ initial concerns began to wear off. The third time the group met, however, Norrick appeared in the attic common room, having heard about the Clutch magic practices that were secretly taking place there. Grudgingly, James allowed him to stay, so long as he kept the lessons a secret. By the next week, however, two more members of the team had appeared on the long couch beneath the room’s single window, grinning eagerly, their wands in hands.

“I didn’t tell anyone!” Norrick said defensively as James glared at him. “It’s all over the house now. You can’t keep secrets very long around here. I even heard Heckle and Jeckle arguing about it downstairs. Heckle thinks we should be learning some tandem spells, by the way, just to mix it up a little.”

James sighed. The truth was that he didn’t really mind. Team Bigfoot’s Clutch magic was coming along slowly but surely, even if it was fairly standard stuff. James sensed that Professor Wood was still somewhat uncomfortable with it, but he had not yet said anything about it. Perhaps this was because the team had not yet won a match, even though the final scores were growing increasingly close. The last match, in fact, had ended in a tie. James had been disappointed to learn that, according to the rules of Clutchcudgel, a tie game translated to a win for whatever team had had the best record coming into the match, thus giving Team Pixie a technical victory. It had been a moral win for the Bigfoots, nonetheless, and there had been raucous celebration in the locker cellar following the match.

As the team carried their good cheer with them back to Apollo Mansion, James recalled his dad’s stories about Quidditch at Hogwarts and felt, for the first time, a deep sense of pride that he was living up to his father’s image. In fact, according to the old stories, Oliver Wood himself had

been quite the formidable player and had been madly passionate about winning. Perhaps Wood's reluctance to use offensive and defensive magic—whether or not it was rooted in his insecurities about his deceased parents and their disapproval of his participation in the Battle of Hogwarts—was held in check by his much older love of sporting victory. James hoped so. He still had more things he wanted to try.

“All right, you lot,” he said, now speaking to slightly more than half of the entire Bigfoot Clutch team, crammed uncomfortably into the attic common room. “That’s everything I know. Time for us to get a little creative. Your homework over the weekend is to research something new, something that the other teams will never expect us to know, and come back Monday ready to teach it to the rest of us. Got it?”

There was a rumble of eager excitement throughout the cramped space. Bump lurked by the bookcase with a large encyclopedia in his wispy hand, as if he couldn't choose who to throw it at.

Across the campus, the leaves had all finally drifted from the trees, carpeting the lawns with orange and yellow. The trees scratched their bare branches at the sky as winter settled slowly over the campus, bringing gusty winds and an increasing chill. James broke out his heavy cloak and began wearing it to classes, buttoned dutifully beneath his chin, its stiff collar sticking up around his ears.

“Very dashing,” Lucy had said on one grey day, smiling crookedly at her cousin as they made their way toward Administration Hall for lunch. “You'd fit right in at Vampire House. Cloaks are all the rage this year.”

“Along with plastic fangs and black hair dye,” Albus grumped next to her, walking with his hands stuffed into his blazer pockets.

Lucy clucked her tongue. “You're just mad because you lost the Quidditch tournament to us.”

“The tourney's not over yet,” Albus countered stridently. “And *I'm* rooting for Zane and his Zombies to beat you all in the final!”

Lucy shrugged as if she didn't care. “May the best team win, of course.”

Albus bristled but didn't pursue it any further. James knew that his brother's experiences in Werewolf House were mixed and this was contributing to his natural moodiness. Sometimes, Albus spoke very highly and proudly of life in Ares Mansion. Other times, he seemed sullen and dejected, slinking over to sit with James, Zane, and Ralph in the corner booth at the Kite and Key, rather than joining the long table near the fireplace where the rest of the Werewolves often gathered. Once or twice, James tried to question Albus about his new mates, but Albus always replied defensively, claiming that nothing was wrong, he loved his house, and couldn't a bloke come and sit by his brother every now and then without being grilled about his personal life? Eventually, James gave up asking about it.

Petra still appeared regularly in Professor Baruti's Potion-Making class and James was glad to see that she generally seemed to be in good spirits. Apparently, Izzy was settling in well at the small campus grade school, which was mostly attended by children of other teachers and administrators.

The two of them lived in a small apartment on the top floor of one of the houses on Faculty Row. James saw them occasionally at dinner in the cafeteria and sat with them whenever he did.

Strangely, those were the times when he felt the most homesick for Hogwarts, even more so than when he talked to Rose, Scorpius, and the rest via the Shard. Sitting with Petra and Izzy, Ralph, and Zane, laughing and talking, reminded him almost painfully of his days in the Great Hall and the Gryffindor common room. Sometimes, on these occasions, he felt the strangest feeling of loss and worry, as if he might never again return to those halls, might never again see all those familiar people and places. It was silly, of course. He'd be returning soon enough. Still, the feeling lingered, and sometimes, especially late at night, he'd find himself thinking of his last conversation with Professor Trelawney. He'd recall her distant, haunted eyes, and her frightening words: *The fates have aligned. Night will fall, and from it, there will be no dawn...*

Occasionally, James saw his mum and dad and sister Lily. They came to some of his Clutchcudgel matches, although not as many as they wanted to, according to his father. Harry Potter's work was becoming more and more hectic, he said, and James could see it in both of his parents' faces. There was a quiet tension there, and an unspoken worry. No outside newspapers made their way onto the campus of Alma Aleron, but James sensed that things were not at all well in the outside world.

"Don't you worry about it," Harry told him when James asked about it. He smiled at his son, but James could tell that it was a thin smile, put on mostly for his benefit. "You just keep at your schoolwork and your Clutchcudgel. Keep an eye on your brother too. Your mother and I are a little worried about him and those new friends of his in Werewolf House."

James shrugged and nodded. His dad was masking his larger worries with concerns about how Al might be fitting in with his fellow Werewolves. It was rather unsettling, but James determined not to make it his problem. He had done that enough over the last two years.

"I've heard of this Professor Magnussen bloke," James told Ralph and Zane the following weekend, walking along the cold flagstone footpath and kicking piles of dead leaves. "Back during our first year. Remember when I told you about sneaking out with the Invisibility Cloak and following my dad and Chancellor Franklyn around during their midnight meeting? Franklyn said something about Magnussen, made it sound like he was a real trouble maker. Compared him to that Umbridge witch that Dad told us about from back in his own day."

"That's pretty bad," Ralph considered, frowning slightly. "I remember those stories."

"But Magnussen's the key to the whole thing!" Zane insisted. "He's the one that found the key to the Nexus Curtain. We could look him up in the Archive, maybe figure out how he did it! If we did that, then maybe we could follow him through into the place between the worlds and find whoever it was that attacked the Vault of Destinies!" Zane's eyes boggled with excitement, but James sighed.

"You're a complete nutter," he said dourly. "We're done with that kind of thing, all right? Ralph and me, we got it all out of our system last year, chasing down that horrible Gatekeeper thing. Rose too. If she was here, she'd probably cuff you on the ear even for bringing it up."

“Hah,” Zane replied, unperturbed. “I’ve spoken to Rose about it already through the Shard. She thinks it’s worth checking out at least. So there.”

Ralph spoke up uncertainly. “She says we should just tell James’ dad about it and let him look into it. It’s his job, after all.”

“Mr. Potter’s got his hands plenty full already,” Zane answered breezily. “I’ve heard he’s getting loads of flack from the local authorities, especially the Magical Integration Bureau. They’re making things pretty tough for him, keeping him out of the loop.”

“What?” James exclaimed angrily. “Where’d you hear that?”

“I eavesdropped on your dad and Chancellor Franklyn in the Kite and Key after Al’s last Quidditch match. *Some* of us don’t need any Invisibiliy Cloaks to pull that off.”

James was rankled. “But why would the local authorities shut him out? He was sent here to *help* them, wasn’t he?”

“Apparently they’re suspicious of him,” Zane replied. “Remember, here in the States, the Progressive Element is all over the place. Not *everyone* believes all that drivel about how Voldy was just a revolutionary thinker and a champion of the people, put down by the magical ruling powers of the day, but enough idiots *do* believe it that it makes trouble for people like your dad. They think he himself might even be behind some of that W.U.L.F. stuff. Apparently, they questioned him about the disappearance of that Muggle politician and the Chrysler Building. They even think he might have been in on the attack on the Vault of Destinies, especially since the missing thread managed to vanish without a trace and they’ve had no luck tracking it down, even though it’d leave a magical trail a mile wide. They think that your dad hasn’t found the thread yet because maybe he doesn’t really *intend* to. Like maybe he’s covering for his own cronies or something.”

“That’s idiotic!” James fumed. “He’s here to rout out the gang that did that stuff and stick them all in Azkaban!”

Ralph was thoughtful. “Well,” he said slowly, “I’m not saying they’re right, of course, but if he *was* involved with a group like the W.U.L.F., it would probably be the perfect cover for him to be on the team that was supposedly meant to investigate them. If you think about it from the Progressive Element point of view, that is.”

Zane was impressed. “All that time you spent on Corsica’s debate team really sunk in, didn’t it, Ralphinator? You can think just like them when you need to.”

“That’s idiotic,” James said again, kicking at a particularly large pile of leaves.

“The Progressive Element is idiotic,” Zane replied. “Once you believe in that kind of stuff, other stupid stuff becomes a lot easier to swallow.”

“But why would they think my dad would ever join such a bunch of awful people?”

“Ah,” Zane said, smiling ruefully. “That’s an easy one. A lot of Americans think that the W.U.L.F. is just a puppet organization, run by the Ministry of Magic and, specifically, the Auror

Department itself. They think that it's just a big scare tactic, meant to keep people afraid and willing to keep living with the old laws of Muggle-magical separation and all that."

Ralph shook his head. "They must think people like James' dad are a bunch of really twisted sneaks then."

Zane nodded.

The three boys stopped as they neared the Octosphere. The big black orb floated in its watery bed, which was now pasted with dead leaves. A dull, nearly inaudible rumble came from the slowly revolving stone.

"According to legend, Professor Magnussen invented this thing," Zane commented, resting his foot on the low stone wall that surrounded the pool. "Did you know that?"

"How do you invent a big black ball?" Ralph asked quizzically.

"It's not just a big black ball, you knucklehead," Zane replied. "It's an answer machine. You ask it any question you want and it'll tell you the answer."

"That's some pretty serious magic," James admitted grudgingly. "Are the answers always right?"

"Always," Zane nodded. "But they're never helpful. That's probably why it's right out here in the open, for anyone to use. If the answers were useful, this thing would probably be the most valuable tool in the whole magical world. You can bet that that's what old Professor Magnussen meant for it to be, if the legends about him are true."

"Why aren't the answers useful?" Ralph asked, peering closely at the slowly revolving stone sphere.

Zane shrugged. "It's all quantum. Magnussen was President of Igor House, a century or so ago, and he was apparently a super genius about technomancy. He was a big believer in this thing called the Wizard's Grand Unification something or other."

"Yeah," James said, warming to the subject. "Franklyn talked about that when he took us on the tour of the Archive. It's called the Wizard's Grand Unification Theory. He says that people used to believe that if you could measure everything everywhere, then you'd be able to predict the future. And if you could predict the future, then basically..."

"You could control it," Zane finished. "Yeah, that's how I heard it too. Apparently, Magnussen was crazy about it. He spent his whole life refining the theory, trying to make it work. The legend is that he used some really horrible methods, although nobody seems to know what they were, exactly. At any rate, this is one of the things he invented along the way. It uses the Grand Unification whasit to tell you the answer to your question. There was some big flaw in the design, though, so that while the answer you get is technically right, it's almost always completely useless. Watch."

Zane turned to the slowly revolving stone orb. In a loud, carefully enunciated voice, he said, "Oh great mystical Octosphere, will Zombie House win this year's Quidditch tournament?"

James and Ralph leaned forward over the low wall that surrounded the pool, watching the sphere. After a few seconds, the sphere settled to a stop, and something seemed to move within it. Blurry white shapes swam up from the inky depths of the orb, solidifying until they reached the surface and became words. The three boys stared at them thoughtfully. They read:

‘AS THE MOONS OF KTHULL ALIGN WITH THE GREAT HORN OF IPSUS’

After a moment, Ralph asked, “So is that a yes... or a no?”

“Nobody knows,” Zane said brightly. “That’s the point. My guess is that Kthull is a planet in some unknown galaxy. Ipsus is probably a constellation or something. Or maybe it’s even a real beast with a real-life horn. Either way, it’s impossible for us to know whether or not some crazy planet’s moons line up with it, so even though the answer is correct, it’s still completely useless to us.”

Ralph asked, “So how do you know it’s correct then?” James thought it was a very reasonable question.

Zane nodded. “Watch this.” He turned again to the Octosphere. “Hey you, who won last week’s Clutch match between Zombie House and the Igers?”

James and Ralph watched as the letters faded from the Octosphere’s surface and it began to turn again, rumbling faintly.

“You don’t really have to say the ‘oh great mystical Octosphere’ part,” Zane admitted as they waited. “I just thought it would sound more, you know, impressive that way.”

In the center of the pool, the black orb stopped turning again. Two words faded up from its depths.

ZOMBIE HOUSE

“See?” Zane said, gesturing toward the floating orb. “If it’s an answer you already know, then it just gives it to you straight up. And it’s always right.”

“I see what you mean,” Ralph frowned. “That’s not very helpful at all.”

Zane nodded. “I hear it drove Professor Magnussen crazy trying to figure out what the problem was with it. They say that’s what drove him to seek out and open the Nexus Curtain, although no one knows why. Maybe if we can retrace his steps, we can find the answer to that mystery too!”

“No way,” James said resolutely, sighing. “Mum was right. We’ve got enough on our hands, what with school, Clutch, and everything else. Whoever this Magnussen was, if there’s anything there to find out, I bet my dad’s already working on it. He’ll find this Nexus Curtain and chase down whoever attacked the Vault of Destinies. You watch.”

Zane seemed reluctant to let the issue go, but he didn't say anything more about it that afternoon or even the rest of the weekend.

On Monday morning, Professor Bunyan took the class up to the museum at the top of the Tower of Art, where he showed them portraits of many of the historical figures they'd been studying. Crouching under the museum's archways, the giant professor indicated paintings of famed American battles, showing how the secret magical contingent of the United States army, led by an American wizard named Quenton Harrow, had assisted in the fight. As James passed a portrait of General George Washington, he commented to Ralph that it was a shame the portrait couldn't talk.

"Who says I can't talk?" the portrait asked, affronted.

James, Zane, and Ralph spun around, surprised. Zane answered first. "But... you were a Muggle, right?"

"What, pray tell, is a Muggle, young man?" Washington asked sternly.

"Er," James said, stammering. "Someone who's not magical? How can you not...?" he gestured toward the portrait's gilt frame. "You're a talking painting!"

"And what of it?" Washington responded, raising his chin.

Ralph shook his head. "I'm confused."

Just then, Professor Bunyan placed one of his huge hands around the boys' shoulders, leading them away from the portrait.

"We try not to talk to the portraits of the Muggle historical figures," he said quietly. "Someone thought it'd be a good idea to magically preserve them for posterity, but being only vaguely aware of the magical world, many of them find the experience a bit... hinky."

James nodded, glancing back at the portrait of Washington. The president watched him stoically. James knew the figure was only paint on canvas, but he felt a little sorry for him nonetheless. He determined to come back later and keep the painting company despite Professor Bunyan's words.

That evening, James, Zane, and Ralph entered the cafeteria to find that it had been decorated for Halloween. Floating over the long tables were dozens of jack-o'-lanterns, grinning, leering, and occasionally swooping down to chomp a slice of pizza from an unsuspecting diner's hand. The skeleton from Mother Newt's Wiz Home Ec classroom had been commandeered, hexed a rather ghastly green, and installed near the main entrance, where it distributed trays to the students as they lined up for dinner. Professor Cloverhoof, the faun President of Zombie House, stood in the back of the room, directing a pair of girls who were busily hanging orange bunting from the low ceiling.

"Hi Professor!" Zane called as the three boys sat down beneath the floating pumpkins. "How's everything coming along for the costume ball?"

"Swimmingly," Cloverhoof answered distractedly. "A bit higher, Miss Worrel. There's nothing quite so depressing as crooked bunting. There we go."

“The Jersey Devil is taking his duties very seriously this year,” Zane said in a stage whisper, turning back to James and Ralph. “He’s chair of the committee for this year’s Halloween Ball. Last year, Mother Newt did it, and we all about drowned in doilies and lace.”

Ralph glanced up at a floating jack-o’-lantern that seemed to be eyeing his plate. “They have the costume ball in the cafeteria?”

Zane shook his head. “No, no, this is just where they have all the drinks and refreshments. It’s always quite a spread. The actual dance takes place upstairs in the main ballroom. It’s huge, with chandeliers the size of the Wocket and a big stage at one end. Don’t tell anybody else,” he added, leaning forward secretively, “but we got Rig Mortis and the Stifftones to play the show! Should be killer!”

“I’ve never heard of them,” James said, rolling a slice of pizza and biting off the end.

“Yeah,” Ralph added, “are they anything like The Boggart Brothers? I like them a lot.”

“No,” Zane answered curtly, clearly annoyed. “The Stifftones are only like the most popular band on American wizarding wireless. You two make me want to cry, I swear.”

“*I’ve* heard of them,” a girl’s voice said. James glanced aside and saw Izzy plopping down next to Zane, clunking her tray onto the table in front of her. “I like them. ‘Hex on My Heart’ is my favorite song right now.”

“Finally, somebody with some class,” Zane sighed.

“How are you doing, Iz?” James asked the younger girl.

“We’re good,” Izzy answered, nodding toward Petra, who was approaching with her own tray. “My teacher says I’m already reading at a fourth-grade level, whatever that means. It’s very good, apparently, considering I’d never gone to school before.”

Zane nearly choked on a piece of crust. “You never went to school? Are you serious? Why not?”

“My mother,” Izzy answered stoically. “She didn’t think I was smart enough for it. She said it would be a waste of time for me and everyone else.”

Petra settled in next to James. “Tell them what Mrs. Quandary told you today, Iz,” she prodded.

Izzy smiled crookedly. “I get to play the Snow Princess in this year’s Christmas show.”

“Cool!” Zane grinned enthusiastically. “You got your wings and halo all picked out yet?”

“We have plenty of time for that,” Petra said, beaming down at her sister. “She’s just getting used to her wand, for now.”

“Her wand?” James blinked. “But... Izzy’s not... er.”

“How are things in Bigfoot House?” Petra asked, glancing aside at James and smiling.

“James is teaching magic to the Bigfoot Clutch team,” Ralph interjected proudly. “Looks like the Bigfoots might win a match for the first time in... I don’t know. Ever, maybe.”

James meant to downplay this detail, but then he noticed the way Petra looked at him, obviously impressed.

“That’s excellent, James,” she said, nudging him. “I’ve noticed how Team Bigfoot’s been playing lately. Much more confident than when the season first started. Are you really responsible for that?”

James shrugged and looked away, his face reddening. “Well... you know. I... yeah. It’s nothing, really.”

“‘Nothing,’ he says,” Zane grinned. “James took that team from zero to hero in no time flat.”

“We haven’t even won a match yet,” James said, trying to suppress a smile of pride. “But we did have one tie game.”

“You watch,” Zane insisted, ignoring James’ protests. “My boy’s going places. Maybe even pro! There was a guy last year, a Werewolf named Stubb, who got drafted by the Hoboken Hobgoblins. I bet James is even better than he was!”

“Stop!” James exclaimed, his cheeks burning. “Look, it’s nothing, all right? I just taught them a few basic spells, that’s all. For some reason, Wood wasn’t coaching anything by way of a magic game. We’re just catching up to everyone else now.”

“He’s so humble, isn’t he?” Zane said mistily, nodding toward Petra. “Why, it breaks my heart. It really does.”

James rolled his eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, the five of them made their way toward the cafeteria doors, talking excitedly about the upcoming Halloween Ball, and James was gearing himself up for something. He felt wound so tight that he thought everyone else must see it, as if he was physically vibrating. There was a knot of people near the door, milling around some unseen curiosity, and James touched Petra’s elbow as they stopped to watch.

“Petra,” he said, trying not to blush, “I was wondering...”

She turned back to him and brushed her hair out of her face with her hand. “Yes?”

“Er,” he began, furious at himself for how awkward he sounded. He took a deep breath. “You know the costume ball that’s coming up?”

She smiled at him wryly. “The one we were talking about just now? Sure. What about it?”

James ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah. Well, I know you’re not really a student, like, but we’ve known each other for some time now, and... I thought maybe we could—”

The crowd near the doorway parted at that moment and somebody backed into Petra, bumping her.

“Make room, everyone,” a voice announced. It was Professor Cloverhoof, his hands raised in the air.

James took another step toward Petra, trying to catch her attention again. “Anyway, I was just thinking, maybe you and me could—”

“Stand aside, Mr. Potter,” Cloverhoof said, touching James on the shoulder. James glanced up, annoyed, and then sidled up next to Petra once more.

“Go on, James,” Petra said, smiling slightly, her eyes twinkling. “I’m listening.”

James smiled back at her, feeling harried but encouraged. He opened his mouth to speak, but another voice cut him off, piercing the air like fingernails on a chalkboard.

“You!” the voice cried, so high and shocked that it silenced the entire room at once. James startled and spun toward the owner of the screeching voice. A thin old man with very white skin and balding black hair stood in the center of the cafeteria doorway, supported between two witches in pale green robes. James recognized him vaguely, but couldn’t remember where he might have seen him before.

“Yooouu!” the man screeched again, drawing the word out like a howl, his voice ebbing away as his breath ran out. James felt a thrill of panic as the man raised a trembling hand, the index finger extended. He was pointing at Petra.

“Mr. Henredon,” one of the green-robed witches said, firming her grip on the man’s arm. “Try not to get too excited. You’re still very weak. You’ve only been thawed enough to walk for a few hours.”

“It was *her!*” Henredon shrieked, tottering on his legs. “*She* was the *one!*”

James took Petra’s hand, tried to pull her away, but she was rooted in place, her eyes frowning, narrowing.

“I dreamed of you,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. Every eye in the crowded room had turned to stare at her.

“You’re confused, Mr. Henredon,” the second green-robed witch soothed, obviously shaken. “You’ve been through a terrible ordeal. Perhaps we should get you back to the medical center.”

“SHE... *FROZE ME!*” Henredon shouted, his voice cracking, his eyes bulging in his pale face. “It was *her* in the Vault of Destinies! Her and some other horrible woman, but *she’s* the one that did it! Her!” He crumpled then, and the green-robed nurses struggled to hold him up. Others rushed forward to assist as pandemonium broke out. Voices babbled as students backed away from Petra and James, forming a widening circle of staring, frightened faces.

“She froze me,” Henredon continued, weeping, his voice growing lost in the increasing rabble. “She came out of the Vault, smiling like a demon... and she froze me...”



Within an hour, Harry Potter had arrived on campus and a gathering had assembled in a faculty lounge on the main floor of Administration Hall. In attendance were Harry, Chancellor Franklyn, Professor Cloverhoof, Petra, James, and a man James had never seen before who had arrived on campus only minutes before Harry Potter. The stranger wore all black robes, gloves, and a black hat with a very wide, flat brim. He had a pleasant face, although James thought there was something vaguely unsettling about it. As the man sat down on the bench near the dark window, James noticed that he seemed to be almost completely hairless. His face was as pink and smooth as a baby's, with his hat pressed down onto his bare scalp so firmly that it rested on his ears. He smiled at James as he smoothed out his robes, and James glanced away.

"It goes without saying," Chancellor Franklyn began, still standing and stoking the fire with a long poker, "that this is a very serious and rather shocking accusation."

James glanced at his father, but Harry Potter's face was as inscrutable as the poker in Franklyn's hand. The man in the wide-brimmed hat, James noticed, was looking at Harry as well, smiling a small pleasant smile. Franklyn slotted the poker into its stand and turned around.

"Mr. Henredon is one of our oldest and most reliable trustees. His service to the school has been entirely spotless. Thus, his allegation cannot be downplayed. If the confrontation that just took place had not occurred in front of much of the entire school, this would be somewhat simpler to address. As it is, direct and decisive action must be taken."

"But it couldn't have been me that froze the poor man," Petra said. "I wasn't anywhere near the Archive when the attack took place. I was asleep in my rooms!"

"You were on campus," the man in the flat-brimmed hat clarified evenly, "which places you in the vicinity of the crime, regardless of your specific location. And being asleep is not what one would tend to call an airtight alibi."

“Excuse me,” Harry interjected, turning to the stranger. “I didn’t get your name, sir.”

“I haven’t given it,” the man replied, still smiling pleasantly. “I assumed that that was the Chancellor’s honor. I’d hate to overstep my bounds.”

“Pardon me,” Franklyn said with a note of impatience in his voice. “Mr. Potter, this is the honorable Albert Keynes, General Arbiter for the Wizarding Court of the United States. Mr. Keynes, Harry Potter is a representative of the European Ministry of Magic, visiting us in pursuit of his duties as that entity’s head Auror.”

“A pleasure,” Keynes nodded smugly, obscuring his face for a moment behind the black brim of his hat.

“I’m impressed that you were able to be here on such short notice,” Harry replied, unsmiling. “General Arbiter sounds like a rather demanding and important post.”

The man laughed lightly. “The title sounds more grand than it is, I’m afraid. There are, in fact, many of us, stationed all around the country, performing our given duties to the best of our ability. My station covers only Pennsylvania, but I admit that the metropolitan Pittsburgh and Philadelphia areas do take up most of my time. I was in the vicinity when I received the message from Chancellor Franklyn.”

Harry asked, “You represent the American Wizarding Court then?” Before the man could answer, however, Chancellor Franklyn spoke up.

“We have a rather more hands-on approach to legal matters in the American magical world, Mr. Potter. A holdover from a time when magical individuals were scattered finely all across the country, making it necessary for the law to go to them, rather than the other way around. Mr. Keynes, in effect, *is* the American Wizarding Court.”

“Judge, jury, and executioner,” Professor Cloverhoof quipped darkly, buffing his nails on his lapel.

Keynes nodded. “Crude, but accurate enough, Professor,” he said, and then turned to Harry. “I am an arbiter, Mr. Potter. My job is to make impartial judgments based on examination of the evidence and interviews of everyone involved in any given case. This is why I have requested that your son join us. I understand that he has observed much of what has taken place in connection with the attack on the Hall of Archives. You need not fear for his involvement. I am trained to be utterly fair and objective.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Harry replied. “Can we expect a quick end to this matter, then?”

Keynes clucked his tongue. “The role of the arbiter is simple, Mr. Potter, but we are trained to be exceedingly thorough. This is a particularly difficult case, as it is a matter of Ms. Morganstern’s word against that of Mr. Henredon’s. Judgments in such cases have been known to take months or even years to reach.”

“But this is just stupid!” James interjected, his face reddening. “Petra was with Izzy when the Archive was attacked! That proves it wasn’t really her that froze Mr. Henredon.”

“Proof is a ticklish concept, my boy,” Keynes said, shaking his head sorrowfully. “The young lady in question is the defendant’s sister, rendering her testimony suspect, at the very least. Further complicating matters, I am given to understand that this is not your first encounter with the law, is it, Ms. Morganstern?”

Petra’s expression cooled slightly as she looked at the man in the black hat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It might have slipped your memory,” Keynes admitted with a nod. “It was the Muggle police, after all. I understand that such mundane authorities might not command the respect of someone like yourself. As I mentioned, however; we arbiters are very thorough. On the way here, I perused the police report regarding what took place on the occasion of your last day at your grandfather’s farm. Granted, I had to read between the lines a bit, but there is no question that the events of that morning resulted in at least one death, and quite possibly two, although the second, I admit, is pure conjecture on my part. Do you remember now, Ms. Morganstern?”

Petra stared at the man, her lips pressed into a thin line. After a moment, she nodded once, curtly.

“This is the first I have heard of these things,” Franklyn said, peering at Petra and then Harry. “Might I inquire as to why a known criminal was allowed to be offered a position at this school?”

Harry didn’t remove his gaze from the man in the black hat. “Petra is not a known criminal,” he answered evenly. “The Auror Department conducted an investigation into the events at Morganstern Farm, and there was no indication of foul play. Warren Morganstern took his own life, as even the Muggle police report must show. His wife, Phyllis Morganstern, formerly Blanche fleur, has indeed gone missing, but since she was wanted for questioning regarding the deaths of both her first and second husbands, this is no great surprise.”

Keynes smoothed his robes again as he said, “Your own investigation notwithstanding, Mr. Potter, these factors must be considered when rendering judgment on this most delicate issue. I will be calling upon many resources and interviewing any number of individuals, both as witnesses and as character references. I may even need to call upon Mr. Morganstern’s widow, if, as you say, she is still among us. It may be months before I reach my verdict.”

James didn’t like Keynes one bit and felt quite confident that regardless of how long the verdict took to reach, the man would find Petra guilty in the end. “What will happen to Petra if you decide she’s done what Mr. Henredon says?”

Keynes leaned back and laced his fingers over his chest. “The law is very clear in such cases, unfortunately,” he said with undisguised relish. “Attempted murder can mean anywhere from twenty years to life in prison. Add to that the use of dark magic, the attack on the Vault of Destinies, and the thievery of a priceless relic in the form of the missing crimson thread—and yes, I do know of these things; as a member of the American Wizarding Court, not much escapes my notice—then it seems inevitable that Ms. Morganstern will spend the rest of her days in Fort Bedlam maximum security wizarding prison. Her sister, Izabella, will become a ward of the state. As a Muggle, it will be up to the Magical Integration Bureau to find her a new home in the non-magical community.

She is underage, fortunately, which means that the authorities at the Crystal Mountain will likely move to have her memory Obliviated. This would probably be best for all involved.”

“What kind of awful person are you?” James exclaimed angrily. “You act like there’s nothing you’d rather see!”

“James!” Harry Potter said sternly, placing a hand firmly onto his son’s shoulder.

Keynes smiled again at James and tilted his head sadly. “It is true, young man. There is nothing I prefer to see more than for justice to be done. It is a mistaken kindness to coddle the guilty. Someday I hope you will come to see the truth of that. Although I have my doubts.”

He glanced at Harry and sighed. James saw that Keynes’ upper lip was sweating lightly.

Petra spoke then, her voice strangely calm. “What will become of me and Izzy during your investigation?”

Keynes brightened a bit. “It is customary for the defendant to be handed over to the arbiter in charge of his or her case until such time as a judgment can be carried out. Therefore, from now until I reach my verdict, you shall be in my custody. Your sister, however, will be sent to the wizarding orphanage in Pittsburgh.”

“My sister,” Petra said coolly, “will be staying with me.”

“I’m afraid you are in no position to make such requests,” Keynes said, his smile widening. “It is a *Muggle* American tradition to deem the defendant innocent until proven guilty. It is a quaint notion that has no place in the Wizarding Court. Until such time as I may find you innocent, you are a suspect in a capital crime, thus you are considered a potential danger and a flight risk. You will be happy to comply with the rule of the law.”

Franklyn cleared his throat. “Let’s not be too hasty,” he began, but Petra cut him off, her eyes still locked on Keynes’.

“Wherever I go, Izzy goes,” she said. “It’s not a request.” Her voice sounded so calm that it was almost surreal, and yet James sensed a sudden chill in the room, making him shiver. Waves of cold seemed to be coming from Petra herself, where she sat next to him.

“Such obstinacy will not do you well as I pursue your case, Ms. Morganstern,” Keynes said, his smile growing equally icy. “You may wish to alter your tone, lest I decide you are even more of a risk than I had heretofore envisioned.”

“I doubt that would be a mistake,” Petra said. James was almost certain that he saw her breath come out in puffs of fog as she spoke.

The tension in the air seemed to spike and James felt a sudden, inexplicable fear that something terrible was about to happen. Images flickered behind his eyes: a black castle, huge and dead, perched on the edge of a cliff; watching eyes hidden in shadow; a white hand holding a singularly ugly dagger with blood dripping from the blade. These were visions from Petra’s dreams. They came to him now, flashing like lightning, cold as icicles. Somehow, she was broadcasting them to him, apparently unintentionally, on that invisible silver cord that still connected him to her. It

was as if she was cycling up, like some kind of magical generator. He felt it, and it was awful, terrifying. What was she? How could she be so mysteriously powerful? James looked across the room, toward Albert Keynes, and suddenly he wanted to yell at the man to shut up, to stop antagonizing Petra. Not only because James loved her, but because he was afraid of her.

But then, surprisingly, James' father spoke.

"I completely understand your predicament, Mr. Keynes," he said, and his tone of voice seemed to sap the tension from the room. "After all, I am a man of the law myself. I am responsible for Ms. Morganstern's presence here. How would it be if I took responsibility for her, and her sister Izabella, during the course of your investigation?"

James turned to look at his dad, wide-eyed, as did Petra.

"It's a kind offer, Mr. Potter," Keynes said stiffly, sitting up straight in his seat. "But one I am duty-bound to refuse. The law, as I have mentioned, is quite clear."

"And as *I* have said, Mr. Keynes," Harry said a bit more loudly, "I am also a man of the law. And I'd like to remind you that *international* magical law provides allowance for foreign detainees to be given over to the custody of representative of their own nation during the course of any necessary legal proceedings."

Keynes looked hard at Harry, his eyes narrowed. The sweat on his upper lip glistened. James noticed that his father's expression, however, was perfectly neutral, as calm as a river stone.

"Are you quite certain, Mr. Potter," Keynes said softly, "that this is the course of action you truly wish to take?"

"I see no other option," Harry replied, "for a man of the law."

Keynes smiled again, slowly. "So be it, then. As a representative of the American Wizarding Court, I release Petra and Izabella Morganstern into your custody. Do know, however, that this means that both the wizarding legal authority and the Magical Integration Bureau will be watching you very closely. There will be sentinels posted near your home around the clock."

"Then they can join the ones that are already there," Harry replied with a sigh. "My wife has been known to invite them in for tea, although they have not yet taken her up on the offer."

"Mr. Potter," Petra whispered, leaning close to him. "You don't have to—"

"Is there any other business to attend to, then?" Harry interrupted, looking briskly from face to face. "No? Then I suggest that I escort Ms. Morganstern and her sister to their flat where they can gather whatever things they need."

The meeting broke up and there was a scuffling of feet and a creak as the door was swung open. Professor Cloverhoof stood near the entry, allowing the others to leave before him. His face was inscrutable as he looked down at James and winked. James followed his father out into the main hallway that ran straight through the center of Administration Hall. Petra rejoined her sister, who was waiting near the lobby stairs with Zane and Ralph. When James and his father reached the main entry, Albert Keynes sidled close to Harry, his demeanor friendly, if a bit condescending.

“I am aware, Mr. Potter,” he said in a low voice, “that you provided sanctuary to Ms. Morganstern and her sister once before. It was, in fact, immediately after the unfortunate events of their last day on Morganstern Farm. Could it be that you know a bit more about those events than you are letting on?”

“I assure you, Mr. Keynes,” Harry replied, “you know as much as I do about these things, and perhaps more. Your information seems to know no bounds whatsoever.”

Keynes laughed, as if Harry and he were old friends. “Alas, if only that were the case. I only ask, though, because I *will* find out. If there are any secrets you might wish to divulge now, it could save us both some trouble later on. I fear that things could get a bit less... civil.”

Harry paused for a long moment, and James looked up at him, watching. For a moment, James thought that his father would tell Keynes what he knew—that Petra had, in fact, been seen coming from the Hall of Archives on the night it was attacked, and maybe even that Merlinus Ambrosius harbored worries about Petra’s mental state, and even her overall goodness. Finally, however, Harry merely shook his head.

“Feel free to interview me and my family, Mr. Keynes,” Harry said, glancing down at James. “We are in the habit of telling the truth. Sometimes, however, you have to ask the right questions.”

Keynes nodded, as if this was exactly the sort of answer he had expected. “Very good. I will begin my investigation this very night, and if it becomes necessary, I will indeed take you up on your offer. For now, I bid you good night. And, er, good luck. I suspect you will need it.”

With that, Keynes pushed open one of the heavy front doors and vanished into the darkness beyond, humming happily to himself.

“Odious man,” Franklyn said with a sigh. “But such individuals are, arguably, the grease that oils the axle of civilization.”

Professor Cloverhoof nodded. “And in much the same way, one feels the need to scrub one’s hands after coming into contact with them.”

Murmuring agreement, the group made their way out into the chilly darkness.

Walking between James and his father, Petra asked, “Are you sure you really want to do this, Mr. Potter? It’ll only make things harder for you and your family. I can handle myself, if I need to.”

“It’s nothing,” Harry replied briskly, but then glanced down at her as they moved across the windy campus. In a lower voice, he said. “But pardon me for asking this, Petra, and know that I will only do so once: *did* you do what Mr. Henredon alleges? Were you involved, for some reason, in the attack on the Vault? Because Mr. Keynes, disagreeable as he is, is quite correct. The truth will be known. It is better to speak now than to be found out later. Are you guilty?”

Petra looked at Harry, and then at James. “I’m not. I swear it. I know a lot of weird stuff has happened around me, but I’m as baffled by it as everyone else. I want to know the truth just as much as Mr. Keynes does. Please believe me.”

James spoke up. “I believe you, Petra,” he said, meeting her eyes. She smiled aside at him, a little sadly.

Harry Potter, however, didn't say anything at all.

Here concludes chapter thirteen. 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.