



## 14. THE MAGNUSSEN RIDDLES

“I thought you told me,” Zane said the next day, “that if there was any connection between this old Professor Magnussen story and the attack on the Vault, your dad and Merlin and everybody else were already all over it.”

James shook his head. “Come on,” he urged. “It’s already ten ’til two. Franklyn’s office hours are nearly over.”

“Yeah,” Ralph said, warming to the subject. “What ever happened to all that stuff about us just being a bunch of school students with too much to do to get all wrapped up in any big adventures?”

James grabbed Ralph’s sleeve and pulled the bigger boy around the corner into a high corridor lined with partially open doors. “That was then, this is now, all right? Dad’s got his hands full with his own problems, especially now that he’s got Petra and Izzy staying with them while that Keynes idiot does his investigating. We’re not taking *over* for him, we’re just helping. If there *is* anything to this whole thing about Professor Magnussen and the Nexus Curtain, we’ll send it his way.”

“I see how it is,” Zane said with a smile. “Now that Petra Morganstern’s fate is in the balance, you’re willing to break the old Prime Directive, eh?”

“I don’t even know what that means,” James sighed impatiently. “Hurry. Franklyn’s office door is still open.”

All three boys piled to a stop just outside of the tall wooden door and peered inside. The office was surprisingly small, dominated by a very large oak desk, a set of visitor's chairs, and a bookshelf crammed with enormous books and the occasional clockwork gizmo. Franklyn sat at the desk facing the door, a large volume in his hands. He glanced up as the three students clambered to a halt.

"Boys," he said welcomingly. "What can I do for you?"

"Hi Chancellor," James said, entering the small room and looking around. "Er, this is your office?"

"One of them at least," Franklyn smiled. "This is the one that serves me for meeting with students and faculty. Why do you ask?"

James shrugged as he moved to stand behind one of the visitor's chairs. "No reason. I just expected something a bit... bigger."

"We thought we'd get to see your Daylight Savings Device again," Ralph added.

"Ah, yes, that," Franklyn answered, closing his book with a thump. "I keep that in my personal study. It is far too large and complex to leave in the faculty offices. After all, we are still victim to the occasional school prank, although such things are somewhat rarer nowadays, thanks to Madam Laosa."

"You mean *Crone* Laosa?" Zane asked, his eyes widening. "So she's really for real? Some of the Zombies were saying that she was just made up to scare us all out of exploring the basements."

"How may I help you boys?" Franklyn asked, smiling a little crookedly, obviously avoiding Zane's question.

"Er," James began, clutching the back of the chair in front of him, "we just have a quick question. It's about the history of the school. We thought you'd be the best person to ask."

Franklyn nodded approvingly. "Always a pleasure to see students taking an interest in the university. And I do suppose I am uniquely qualified to discuss its history since I have been alive throughout much of it. What's your question?"

James glanced back at Ralph and Zane, suddenly reluctant. "It's... er... about one of the professors."

"From a long time ago," Ralph added.

Franklyn's chair creaked as he leaned back in it. "We've had a rather impressive list of teachers throughout the years, continuing even to the present. Mr. Bunyan, the giant, is one of our most recent additions, and believe me, it was no small task to convince him to take the post. Prefers the wide open spaces, he does, along with his great blue ox, Babe."

"It's about Professor Magnussen," Zane blurted, stepping forward.

Franklyn's expression froze on his face. He paused, staring at all three boys.

“Do you remember him?” James prodded tentatively. “We looked him up in the library, but there was almost nothing. His full name was Ignatius Karloff Magnussen, and he was Head of Igor House like a hundred and fifty years ago or something.”

Franklyn continued to study the boys, his eyes suddenly cautious. He leaned forward slowly again, producing another long creak from his chair.

Ralph said, “There are legends about this Magnussen bloke. They say that he opened up something called the Nexus—”

“Boys,” Franklyn interrupted, “I am afraid that Professor Magnussen is a name from a period of time that this school would prefer to forget. It would behoove you not to inquire about him any further.”

“Well,” Zane replied slowly, glancing aside at his friends, “as much as I’d like to agree to that, I suspect that we’re just about ten times more curious now.”

Franklyn sighed hugely. “I suppose you learned of this in Professor Jackson’s Technomancy class, yes?” He nodded to himself, not awaiting an answer. “The professor and I have had words on the subject. We have rather differing views regarding the merits of security versus disclosure. Perhaps I simply wish to make my job as Chancellor a bit easier. Surely the good professor would agree.”

James risked pressing the matter a bit further. “What can you tell us, Chancellor? Is it true that Magnussen opened the Nexus Curtain and made his way into the World Between the Worlds?”

Franklyn stood up and straightened his waistcoat. He turned toward the window and leaned to peer out over the campus.

“He used to live in the most prominent faculty home of Alma Aleron, the one that originally belonged to John Roberts, one of the school’s founders. He was a brilliant man, Magnussen, and yes, I knew him. He was, in fact, that most rare of men: he was a scientist, and he was a lover of stories. His calculating mind was equal to the best technomancers who’ve ever lived, but his love of the tale allowed him to think in creative, ingenious ways that none of his colleagues could ever dream. The characteristics that made him great, however, also led him to... obsessions. It was these, unfortunately, that drove him to commit acts that were both heinous and ultimately senseless.”

Franklyn paused, apparently determining how much he should say. Finally, he went on, still peering out the window. “It was a time of great interest in magical exploration and experimentation. Schools such as Alma Aleron allowed a virtually unlimited amount of autonomy and resources to their teachers, all in the name of progress. Too late did we learn that sometimes progress means decay. Professor Ignatius Magnussen was allowed to conduct his experiments and pursue his goals, even though the costs were far higher than we knew at the time, and the dangers were... well, incalculable. By the time he was found out, it was too late to stop him. In the end, he fell victim to his own designs, and that, unfortunately, is the end of his story.”

“What did he do, sir?” James persisted.

Franklyn was thoughtful. After a moment, he glanced back at the boys, his eyes narrowed. “Why, pray tell, are you three so interested in this?”

“Er...” James began, but Zane overrode him.

“We’re just curious, sir. It’s in our natures. You know how we young people are.”

Franklyn studied Zane for a long moment. “Indeed I do. Curiosity is a good thing, my young friends. It is the fuel for the engine of invention. But like any fuel, it can be dangerous. It can burn you, if you are not careful with it.”

James asked, “Is that what happened to Professor Magnussen?”

Franklyn’s face remained calm as he shifted his gaze to James. After a long moment, he said, “Magnussen lived in the home that once belonged to one of this school’s three founders, as I said. It is the home that now stands in ruins at the opposite end of the mall.” He nodded toward the window. “Professor Magnussen is the *reason* that that building was reduced to rubble. His laboratory was there and it was the scene of terrible things. When these things became known, a riot erupted on the campus. Hundreds rushed to the mansion, intent on dragging Magnussen out and bringing him to justice. Of course, an arbiter had already been assigned to Magnussen—justice had already been set into motion—but because of Magnussen’s status, he was granted the privilege of maintaining his post and his home during the investigation. This infuriated the population of the school, including, I regret to say, much of the faculty. During the fracas that followed, Magnussen escaped from the mansion. In the aftermath, the mansion was burned nearly to the ground. To this day, no one knows if the fire was an accident or deliberate. Some say that Magnussen himself set it, meaning to distract everyone from his escape. Either way, it not only destroyed the mansion, it wiped out all the evidence of what Magnussen had done. And, frankly, perhaps that was for the best.”

Zane was impressed. “So what happened to him after that? Did he live out the rest of his days on some South American island somewhere?”

“Ignatius Magnussen was never seen or heard from again,” Franklyn answered brusquely, seating himself once more at his desk. “The most likely explanation is that he escaped via the rift that he created into some reality that none of us can even imagine.”

“So he *did* succeed in opening the Nexus Curtain!” Ralph exclaimed.

Franklyn pinned Ralph with a steely gaze. “He succeeded in opening *something*, Mr. Deedle. Unfortunately, we had virtually no time to question him before his escape and the fire ruined what clues we might have gained in his absence. Therefore, no one knows for sure what he did or where he might have gone. All we know is that his ‘success’ came at great cost and ruined many lives. I suggest you leave it at that.”

James wanted to ask more, but Franklyn’s expression made it clear that he was done discussing the topic. The three boys thanked the Chancellor and excused themselves as quickly as possible.

“Well,” Ralph said once they had exited Administration Hall, “that was pretty much a bust.”

James pulled his cloak around him as the wind picked up. “At least we found out that Magnussen really did open up the Nexus Curtain,” he replied. “That means that there might be something to Zane’s theory. Maybe whoever really did steal the crimson thread used it to open the Curtain again, and is still hiding out there, in the World Between the Worlds. If we can figure out how Magnussen got through, then maybe we can do it as well.”

Zane feigned surprise as he said, “I thought we were just going to turn this all over to the great Harry Potter and his squad of Auror superdudes?”

“Shut up, already, why don’t you?” James grumbled crossly. “Dad’s got enough on his hands. There’s no harm in us following a few leads, is there? It’ll save him some time. Besides, we’re already right here on campus. We can do all the footwork more easily than he can. I just wish Franklyn hadn’t been so tight-lipped about everything. He gave us almost nothing to go on.”

Zane sighed expansively and stopped walking. A moment later, Ralph and James stopped as well and turned to look back at him.

“Maybe,” the blonde boy said with a crooked smile, “we can try it *my way* now?”



James was quite curious as to what Zane’s way actually was, but as it turned out, the next few days were too busy for the boys to attempt anything at all.

On Friday evening, James joined Zane, Albus, Lucy, and Ralph at Pepperpock Down for the Vampires versus Werewolves Clutchcudgel match. Albus rooted ardently for his own team while Lucy led spirited cheers and waved a red and black banner in her gloved hands. James, Ralph, and Zane, however, liking neither team, cheered only when there were penalties or injuries, earning quite a few disapproving looks from those in the grandstands around them. In the end, Werewolf House defeated the Vampires by a score of eighty-eight to sixty-five, leaving Lucy in a grumpy mood that lasted well into her second licorice soda at the Kite and Key.

James spent most of Saturday afternoon in the attic of Hermes House, accompanied by Zane, in search of a costume for that evening’s Halloween Ball. Together, they settled on a mummy costume comprised mostly of shreds of old sheets, which had, for some forgotten reason, been tie-dyed into rainbow colors.

“We’ll call you the Saturday Night Fever,” Zane proclaimed happily, examining James in his costume. “The Disco Mummy! You’ll be a total hit. Frankly, I’m a little jealous.”

Having failed disastrously in his attempt to make Petra his date to the Ball, James sought out and asked Lucy to go with him, figuring that they could have more fun together than apart. She agreed instantly and with rather more enthusiasm than James had expected. When he arrived at Erebus Mansion that evening to escort her to the ball, she came down the main staircase dressed as a vampire princess, resplendent in a rather striking black dress, boots, and a vial of blood worn on a black ribbon around her neck.

“It’s not real blood,” she smiled sheepishly, showing her canine teeth, which had been hexed into long points for the evening. “It’s just poisonberry juice, so I really can drink it if I want to. I borrowed the boots from Professor Remora. Can you believe her feet are nearly as small as mine?”

James told her that he couldn’t and that he frankly preferred to think of Professor Remora’s feet as absolutely little as possible. Along the way to Administration Hall, they met Ralph, who was dressed as a ghost with a rather sadly moth-eaten sheet over his head. Together, the three made their way down to the cafeteria for drinks and then up to the main ballroom, where the band, Rig Mortis and the Stifftones, was already well into their first set.

It turned out to be a delightfully raucous evening. The music was very loud and after a few failed attempts, Lucy finally coaxed James into joining her on the dance floor. Zane was already there, gyrating and bouncing wildly, dressed, of course, as a zombie. He’d painted his face green, added some stitches with black magic marker, and donned a moldy, ill-fitting, powder blue tuxedo. Across from him, Cheshire Chatterly looked rather fetching as his zombie prom date, complete with a blood-stained pink taffeta dress and every inch of exposed skin charmed a deathly, blotchy blue.

“Some party, eh?” Zane called as he shimmied past.

“It is!” James called back, grinning. In front of him, Lucy danced happily, looking surprisingly beautiful with her hair done up in a complicated beehive. He told her as much as the lights flashed and twirled all around. Even in the flickering dimness, he saw the blush rise to her pale cheeks and she smiled at him, obviously pleased.

It wasn’t until the following Wednesday afternoon that Zane finally gathered James and Ralph and told them to get ready for a little ‘fact-finding mission’ once classes were over for the day. By five o’clock, all three boys met at Apollo Mansion for a quick dinner.

The meal was prepared by the house steward, a bald, hunched, painfully thin wizard whose demeanor usually hovered somewhere between veiled crankiness and outright hostility. Known only as Yeats, the steward had apparently been a fixture in Apollo Mansion for nearly seventy years and didn’t seem to have any intention of retiring, ever. He was so old that he appeared to be in need of a good dusting, but he moved with a sort of grim economy that implied that if ever the need arose, he could probably tackle any single member of Bigfoot House with one of his large knucky hands while flipping crepes with the other.

“I hope this is to the young sir’s liking,” he said through gritted teeth as he pushed their plates in front of them. “Cheeseburgers and homemade potato chips. The cornerstone of any nutritious dinner.”

“Thanks, Yeats,” Ralph said, digging in.

“What is it about that guy?” Zane asked quietly as Yeats retreated slowly to the stove. “Every time we ask him for something, I get the impression that he’s barely restraining himself from hexing us into salt and pepper shakers.”

James shrugged and munched a potato chip. They were still hot and sprinkled with some kind of crumbly blue cheese. “Yeats is all right,” he said. “Reminds me of home. He’s like a grown-up human version of Kreacher.”

“He is!” Ralph nodded, his mouth full. “I *knew* he seemed familiar. You’re right. He does remind me of good old number twelve Grimmauld Place.”

Twenty minutes later, the three boys made their way out into the darkening evening, Zane in the lead. James noticed that they were heading toward the Hall of Archives.

“Just doing a little research, fellas,” Zane said to the Werewolf students who were still serving as guards around the Archive steps. “Or do we need a permission slip signed in triplicate from the Chancellor himself?”

“Just make it quick, Walker,” one of the Werewolf boys sneered. “The Hall gets locked up at eight on the dot, whether you’re out of there or not.”

“Hey,” Zane grinned as he trotted up the steps toward the huge doors, “that rhymed! You’ve been practicing that one, haven’t you? You Werewolves are so stinkin’ clever.”

“Smile while you can, Walker,” another of the boys called. “We’ll see if you’re still grinning this Friday night after your team meets ours on the Clutch course.”

“Well, that didn’t rhyme at all,” Zane admonished. “Back to the doghouse with you.”

The Werewolf boys bristled, but they were apparently too committed to their guard duties to abandon their posts. James and Ralph sidled up the steps behind Zane, avoiding eye contact with the older boys on either side.

“So what are we going to do here?” James asked as they entered the round, darkened room of the Disrecorder. “Even if there are any relics from Magnussen’s time, they’d be in the restricted section of the Archive. We can’t get in there, no matter how many Werewolves you insult.”

“Au contraire,” Zane announced, producing a slim golden key from his pocket. James recognized it.

“That’s an Archive skeleton key,” he said, impressed. “Just like the one Franklyn used when we went down to the Vault of Destinies. How’d you get that?”

Zane shrugged. "I've been planning things out for some time now. I figured that you'd eventually warm up to having a little extracurricular adventure. What do you think I agreed to go with Cheshire Chatterly to the costume ball for?"

Ralph suggested, "Because she looks excellent in a pink taffeta dress?"

"Well, yes, there is that," Zane answered thoughtfully, "but that's not all there is to it. She's on the maintenance crew that works here in the Archive, and she's always been on Henredon's good side."

"I can see why," Ralph nodded.

James shook his head wonderingly. "You nicked the key from her?"

"No!" Zane exclaimed, offended. "I just asked her for it. What kind of cad do you think I am?"

"Sorry," James replied, blinking.

"I told her I needed to look up some famous old dancer so I could practice my steps for the ball. She about split in two. Gave me the key that very second."

Ralph whistled, impressed. "You danced with a girl just to get your hands on that key?"

"Anything for the cause," Zane sighed. "Come on."

Using the key, the boys opened the door to the inner archive. After some nervous slinking around, they finally found a gated section locked off with a large chain and padlock. A quick wave of the skeleton key and a tap of Zane's wand opened the padlock, however, and the three crept slowly into the dark chamber beyond.

"It's so dark and dusty," Ralph commented, keeping his voice unconsciously hushed. "How are we going to find what we're looking for in all this?"

"Cheshire told me how they catalog things in here," Zane answered, holding his lit wand overhead. "Date first, and then the name of the event or person. Look at the top of the aisles. Magnussen taught between eighteen thirty and eighteen fifty-nine."

"Over here," James called, peering up at the shelves. The other two joined him and began skulking along the shelves, examining the myriad odd objects and blowing dust off their yellowed note cards.

A shuffling sound surprised the boys. They froze in place, eyes wide, staring at each other.

"Was that one of you?" James whispered.

Ralph gulped. "It wasn't me. It came from the aisle behind us."

"It was probably nothing," Zane whispered, glancing around. Almost immediately, a faint thump sounded nearby. All three boys jumped. Slowly, James turned toward the sound, lifting his wand. He was barely breathing. As one, the three boys leaned around the end of the aisle, peering into the darkness beyond.



Something pushed out of the shelf immediately next to James' face, mashing up against his cheek and making a noise like a tiny motorboat. He cried out and leapt into the air, dropping his wand and scrabbling at his cheek.

"Patches!" Zane rasped, his eyes bulging.

James spun around, heart pounding, and looked. Patches the cat stood on the shelf, purring noisily, his bullet head bobbing. There were cobwebs caught in his whiskers.

"Patches, you rascal!" Zane declared, reaching to scratch the cat between the ears. "What are you doing down here? You about gave James a heart attack!" He laughed nervously.

"Seems to me *you* were pretty wiggled out too," James grumped, reaching to pick up his dropped wand. "You try getting some great furry head and wet nose pushed into your face out of the dark and see how you feel about it."

"What's he doing down here?" Ralph asked, stepping forward to pet the cat himself. "I thought he always hung out around Administration Hall."

Zane nodded. "He does. I've never seen him anywhere else."

"Is it just me," Ralph said, glancing sheepishly between Zane and James, "or does this feel like kind of a bad jinx? Maybe we should call the whole thing off, eh?"

James expected Zane to scoff at the suggestion, but when he turned to the blonde boy, he saw him studying the cat critically.

"What's up, Patches?" he asked the cat where it still stood purring on the shelf. "You here to grant us your blessing? Or are you going to rat us out to the big wigs back at Administration Hall?"

The cat stopped purring almost immediately. He hunkered low and peered over the ledge of the shelf. A moment later, he thumped lightly to the floor and began to stalk off along the aisle, his tail sticking up.

"Well," Zane blinked, "pardon me for living."

Ralph said, "Maybe he was offended by the word 'rat'."

"Come on," James suggested, turning back to the shelves. "Forget him. He's just a cat. If you remember, he thought we were supposed to be in Igor House."

Zane glanced at James. "Have you wondered if maybe he was right?"

James met his friend's gaze and frowned. "What do you mean? Bigfoot House fits us just fine. What's some old cat know that we don't?"

"I'm just saying," Zane replied. "There's a reason he's here. Maybe it's worth thinking about."

James felt impatient. He stopped and stared up at the dark ceiling for a moment. "There," he said, glancing back at Zane and Ralph. "I've thought about it. Can we get on with it now? This place creeps me out."

Zane shrugged. Dismissing the cat, the three returned to their search of the shelves. A few minutes later, Zane called out. James and Ralph trotted down the aisle to join him.

"It's...", Ralph began, and then swallowed thickly. "It's... a skull."

James held his wand closer. Two objects were pushed into a small cubby hole, and one of them was indeed a human skull, missing its jawbone. The other was a woman's boot, very old and scuffed, made of black leather. The card affixed to the front of the shelf read: 1859, OCTOBER 5, I. K. MAGNUSSEN INTERROGATION 1.

"Maybe it's not real," James suggested, peering at the yellowed skull.

"It sure *looks* real," Ralph said, shuddering.

"It's just an old bone," Zane said, rolling his eyes and reaching for the skull. "I'll carry it. Grab the boot and let's get this over with."

As quickly as they could, the three boys carried their acquisitions back up to the room of the Disrecorder. James breathed a sigh of relief as he walked beneath the thick, tiny windows embedded in the domed ceiling. It was dark outside now, but it was nice to see the faint blue glow of the night sky above.

"Who wants to do the honors?" Zane asked, holding up the skull and peering at it. "What do you think, Mr. Bones?" He moved the skull like a puppet and answered in a higher voice, "I think you should, Zane-brain, since you're so cool and dashing. And this was your idea after all."

James sighed wearily. "Quit it. You're freaking out Ralph."

"I'm not freaked out," Ralph objected, his face pale. "I mean, yeah, I am. But just a little."

"Let's get to it then," Zane squeaked, puppeting the skull again. "Upsie-daisy."

With a small clunk, Zane set the skull onto the concave bowl of the Disrecorder.

Instantly, the room changed. It brightened and became much smaller. James, Ralph, and Zane turned on the spot and found themselves in a dim corner, peering into a sort of cramped study. Fire crackled in the brick fireplace and darkness pressed against the tall windows. Three men were seated at a table, two on one side, facing the third. James was not entirely surprised to see that Chancellor Franklyn was one of the men seated at the table. He looked only slightly younger, with a rather less rotund middle. The man next to him wore the black robes and hat of an arbiter, although his skin was dark and he had a thin beard. In the center of the table, looking like a Halloween decoration, was the yellowed, jawless skull. The dark man had just finished tapping it with his wand.

"Douglas Treete, General Arbiter of the Wizarding Court of the United States of America, Philadelphia Station," he said blandly. "Overseeing the preliminary interrogation of one Ignatius Karloff Magnussen, detained for various charges, including theft and misuse of corpses, torture, and suspicion of murder. I have chosen to use this skull as the relic for this interrogation since it serves as Exhibit A for the case in question. I am accompanied by Benjamin Amadeus Franklyn, Head of the

Alma Aleron Technomancy Department, and immediate superior of the defendant. Professor Magnussen, if you would state your full name for the record.”

James turned his attention to the man seated across from Franklyn and the arbiter. Magnussen was large with a barrel chest and a square head crowned with a fringe of short grey hair. His expression was grim, his dark brow lowered over a sharp, finely sculpted nose.

“I am Professor Ignatius Karloff Magnussen the Third,” he said, and James was surprised by the man’s cultured, pleasant voice. Unlike most Americans, Magnussen spoke with a distinct British accent.

Zane leaned toward James and Ralph and whispered, “I heard that he never approved of America’s break from England. In protest, he always spoke in what he called ‘the King’s English.’”

James frowned and listened as Treete, the arbiter, spoke again.

“You are aware of the allegations against you, Professor Magnussen?”

Magnussen didn’t respond. He simply stared across the table, his eyes like steel marbles. Treete cleared his throat.

“For the record, Professor, you are accused, at the very least, of dabbling in forbidden practices that threaten the stability of the dimensional hierarchy. Is it true that you have sought to control the future by exploitation of the Wizarding Grand Unification Theory?”

Magnussen remained utterly impassive. James could tell that the man was listening, for he stared at the men across from him as if he intended to pin them to a corkboard like butterflies. He simply did not seem to feel the need to respond to their questions. Franklyn, for his own part, appeared completely miserable. His face was pale behind his square spectacles.

“So be it, then,” Treete said, adjusting his own glasses and peering down at a parchment in front of him. “You are further accused of opening a rift between dimensions, something legendarily referred to as the Nexus Curtain, with no regard to the consequences. How do you respond to this allegation?”

Magnussen did not stir. He might as well have been an extremely lifelike statue.

Treete had apparently resigned himself to Magnussen’s silence. “Additionally, sir, you are accused of stealing bodies from the campus graveyard and conducting unlawful dissections of them. This skull, as I have mentioned, is Exhibit A in regard to that allegation. It was found in the basement of this very house, along with the sort of tools one might expect to use for such purposes. Furthermore, you are suspected in the abduction and torture of as many as eight Muggle citizens of the city of Philadelphia. Evidence of hasty Obliviation has only succeeded in destroying these victims’ ability to identify their tormentor, but has left traces of memories of this school and the magical world at large.”

Treete took off his glasses and stared hard at Magnussen. “Such acts, if they are proven to be true, break any number of very serious laws, Professor, not to mention the law of common human decency to which we all profess to ascribe. None of these, however, are as serious as the final accusation. As you are certainly aware, the corpse of a young Muggle woman, an impoverished local

seamstress by the name of Fredericka Staples, was recently found in an alley near the entrance to this school. Her body was mutilated nearly beyond recognition and she was missing a single boot. That missing boot, sir, was discovered two nights past in the basement of this home. I must ask you again: how do you respond to these allegations?”

Magnussen stirred for the first time, but when he spoke, he addressed Franklyn. “Was it you who summoned the authorities?” he asked, his voice merely conversational.

“You gave me little choice,” Franklyn replied quietly. “Research is one thing, Ignatius. This...” He shook his head.

Magnussen smiled tightly. “You always were too weak to appreciate the risks associated with any great endeavor. You, Benjamin, are an academician. You are not like me. You are not an explorer.”

“Yours is not a dream of exploration,” Franklyn replied, his face darkening. “It is an obsession with power. This is not one of your fanciful stories of the heroic outcast struggling against ignorant foes. Your actions have affected real people. I should have intervened months ago when I discovered that you were experimenting with the Wizarding Grand Unification Theory. The Octosphere was bad enough, but at least it turned out to be harmless. Attempting to observe and measure all things at once, in the name of domination, is a madman’s fantasy.”

“I was mistaken, I agree,” Magnussen replied, as if he and Franklyn were merely discussing the matter as friends. “I was preoccupied with the microscopic. I fell into the conviction that observing all things meant breaking the world down into smaller and smaller bits, recording the actions of even the most infinitesimal details—the motion of blood corpuscles through the pathways of arteries, the firing of neurons in individual human brains. I studied these things in great detail, learning what I could from the dead, gaining even more knowledge from my systematic studies of the living. You choose to call it torture, of course, and yes, even murder, because you fail to grasp the monumental nature of the end goal. What is mere infliction of pain in the face of perfect understanding? What is one paltry life in the name of the total unification of the cosmos?”

“Ignatius,” Franklyn interrupted. “Stop! You are only making matters worse for yourself.”

“Eventually,” Magnussen went on, now leaning slightly over the table, his eyes bright, “I determined that I was thinking too much like my fellows, failing where all those before me had failed. With that realization, I remembered my *Heraldium*; ‘He who fails to see the mountain stumbles headlong over the pebbles.’ Don’t you see? The secret was not in the microscopic at all, Benjamin. The secret, of course, was in the *macroscopic*! Not the tiny, but the monumental! Totality of measurement could only be accomplished when one could view the totality of *realities*! I knew then what I had to do. I had to break out of the confines of this dimension and find a place where I could observe *all* dimensions at *once*. What you call a mere legend, I have walked upon with my own two feet. I have been through the Nexus Curtain. I have trod the World Between the Worlds and witnessed the pathways into every other dimension.”

Treete shook his head, his eyes narrowed. “Am I to understand then, Professor, that you are admitting to all of the allegations leveled against you?”

“Please, Ignatius,” Franklyn said, nearly pleading with the big man across from him. “Your obsessions have driven you to madness. Whatever you have done, whatever you have seen, it has obviously affected you in some dreadful way. There is help for you here, if you choose to seek it. Beware what you say, lest you forfeit that option.”

Magnussen chuckled drily. “You think that I should care what this little man can do to me? Let him attempt to stop me. I am beyond the rim now, Benjamin. I am past the event horizon of destiny, incapable of returning even if I wished to. And I do *not* wish to. I embrace my mission. I will go to it with great relish.”

Treete pushed back his chair and stood up. “I am afraid that I have no choice then, sirs. Out of respect for your position, Professor Magnussen, and at your personal request, Professor Franklyn, I leave you now to formulate my verdict. You can expect my return within the week, along with a cadre of wizarding police, to escort the defendant to the Crystal Mountain for processing. Professor Franklyn, for the interim, will you state your willing assumption of full responsibility for the guarding of the defendant?”

Franklyn’s eyes remained locked on Magnussen. “I assume full responsibility for the defendant.”

“So be it,” Treete said briskly. He retrieved his wand from his sleeve, reached out, and tapped the yellowed skull that sat on the table before him. Instantly, the room vanished, leaving James, Zane, and Ralph blinking in the darkness of the hall of the Disrecorder.

“Whoa,” Zane breathed, looking down at the yellowed skull.

Ralph shook his head slowly. “Franklyn wasn’t kidding around when he said that that bloke was someone the school would like to forget.”

“Well, now we know *why* Magnussen went through the Nexus Curtain, at least,” James sighed. “He was convinced that he had to measure everything in every *dimension* in order to know the future and control it. Is that how it sounded to you?”

Zane nodded. “Magnussen was one crazy whack job. I see why he was Head of Igor House. But where most of those guys just talk a big game about wanting to take over the world, *he* actually went out and *did* something about it.”

“But we still don’t know *how* he got through the Nexus Curtain,” Ralph commented. “And that’s the bit we really need to know, right? How else are we going to get through to the World Between the Worlds and see if the real bad guys are hiding out there?”

Zane took the skull gingerly from the bowl of the Disrecorder. “According to Professor Jackson, the Nexus Curtain can only be opened with a key from some other dimension. Whoever attacked the Vault of Destinies has the crimson thread from the Loom, which would do the trick since it came from some neighboring reality. What could Magnussen have used as a key?”

James shrugged and nodded toward Ralph, who was holding the second relic, the old boot. “Let’s try that one. Maybe it’ll tell us what we need to know.”

Ralph looked down at the boot in his hands. “You think this is the boot that they talked about in the vision? The one that belonged to that Muggle woman that Magnussen, er...”

“Just put it on the thing, Ralph,” Zane said, shaking his head slowly.

Ralph stepped forward and placed the small boot onto the stone pedestal before him. In response, the hall of the Disrecorder dimmed, but remained relatively unchanged. For a moment, James thought that there was something wrong with the relic, but then he heard a voice, echoing quietly. He followed the sound of it, turning to look about the hall, and saw a single flame burning in a small table lamp. Next to it was Benjamin Franklyn, seated in a wooden chair with a desk attachment, writing. Unlike the previous vision, which had been bright and solid, the image of Franklyn looked almost like a projection on smoke. Franklyn’s ghostly quill scratched on the parchment as he spoke the words aloud, dictating to himself. His voice seemed to come from very far away.

“These are the notes of Professor Benjamin Amadeus Franklyn,” he said slowly, bent over the parchment, “detailing the final records of the events of this night, October the eighth, eighteen fifty-nine, the last night of Professor Ignatius Magnussen, formerly a valued teacher at this institution, and a friend...”

Franklyn stopped and looked up, almost as if he’d heard the boys’ scuffling footsteps. James froze in place, but then he realized that the vision of Franklyn was merely pausing to think. His eyes were bright behind his square spectacles. After a long moment, he drew a breath and leaned over the parchment again.

“The flames still burn in the foundation of the house Ignatius Magnussen once called home. How the fire began, no one knows for sure. I myself suspect a deliberate causation, perhaps even set by the professor himself. The mob that preceded the fire was maddened beyond reason and did nothing to extinguish the flames once they appeared. I am dismayed to announce that there were many in tonight’s assembly who wished to see Magnussen’s corpse pulled from the dying flames, killed as surely as the fire destroyed his home. Preliminary observation of the ruins, however, has revealed no trace of the professor’s body. I have no doubt that further searches over the coming days will prove equally unsuccessful. Magnussen is not here. He has escaped, probably during the very height of the fire, while the vengeance-seeking riot was in full fever.”

Franklyn stopped writing again. He put down the quill and pushed his hand up under his spectacles, rubbing his eyes wearily. He didn’t seem to want to go on, but after a moment, he retrieved the quill and began again, speaking the words aloud as he wrote them.

“Where Ignatius Magnussen has gone, I cannot begin to guess. Surely, he has by now accomplished what he swore was his destiny: he has retraced his steps through the Nexus Curtain, into whatever unknowable realm lies beyond. I believe it is likely that from that realm he will never return, thus I wish to record what I now know of his most recent endeavors. Unfortunately, my interviews with the professor over the previous two days revealed very little useful information. There are only two details worth remembering. The first was his riddle regarding how he learned to open the Nexus Curtain. He told me, and I quote...”

Franklyn paused again and retrieved another parchment from the table next to him. He studied it closely, adjusting his spectacles. James noticed that the woman's boot was sitting in the darkness beneath the table, leaning against one of the chair's thin spindly legs.

"And I quote," Franklyn went on, putting his quill to the parchment before him, "'The truth walked the halls of Erebus Castle. It was there all along, for anyone to see.' I myself have walked those halls for well over a century, and have not met anyone or anything that spoke of the paths of the Nexus Curtain. If there is any truth in Magnussen's claim, then it is carefully hidden and will require further study."

James turned to Zane, his eyes widening. "Erebus Castle is the home of Vampire House, right?" he whispered.

Zane nodded. "We can get in and explore around a bit, if Lucy lets us."

"Shh," Ralph hissed, leaning closer to the ghostly vision of Benjamin Franklyn.

"The second detail is, I fear, an even more obscure riddle. When asked where the Nexus Curtain was, Magnussen only smiled and said nothing. This, of course, is the detail which concerns me most since if what the professor claims is true, then he has succeeded in breaching the divide into the World Between the Worlds. I fear less the dimensional instabilities that might be created by such a rift. More, I fear what may come through into our own dimension from those beyond. My entreaties to Magnussen—that the boundaries between the worlds are there for good reason, to establish barriers between incompatible realities—fell entirely upon deaf ears. Finally, however, late last night, Professor Magnussen gave me an answer to my question, although I suspect that it is as useless as anything that might be provided by his damned Octosphere. When pressed about the location of the Nexus Curtain, he finally smiled and told me," here, Franklyn made a weary but passable imitation of Magnussen's accent, "It lies within the eyes of Rowbitz."

He paused once more, rereading what he had written. With a sigh, he began to write again.

"The riddle is intentionally misleading and probably hopelessly obscure, and yet I know the professor well enough to know that he would not merely lie. He is too arrogant not to have offered up a valid clue, even if it would be impossible to solve. In time, I will study both of these quotes, in the hopes of finding the Nexus Curtain, and closing it forever. For now, however, I find that my duties must revolve around the more immediate concerns of calming the school and explaining myself to Arbiter Douglas Treete. I have failed in my duties... in more ways than one."

Franklyn sighed deeply, put down his quill, and carefully folded the parchment he had written upon. When he was done, he retrieved the small boot from the floor next to him, slipped the folded parchment into it, and then tapped the boot with his wand.

The vision evaporated in a puff of dry smoke, returning the Hall of the Disrecorder to its normal dimness.

Immediately, Zane tucked the skull under his arm, turned around, and reached for the old boot that sat atop the stone pedestal. He peered inside it.

“It’s still there!” he said, smiling. “Franklyn’s old note! Parchment feels like it’ll crumble to bits if I pull it out, though. Cheshire and the catalog crew probably would have preserved it somehow if they’d known it was there.”

“The Nexus Curtain lies within the eyes of Rowbitz,” Ralph said thoughtfully. “Any ideas who Rowbitz is?”

Zane scrunched his face up with concentration. “It rings a bell, actually. I’ll see what I can find out.”

“And we can ask Lucy about letting us look around the halls of Erebus Castle,” James added. “We have two clues to go on. Not bad.”

“Wait a minute,” Ralph said, shaking his head. “If these clues were solvable, don’t you think that Chancellor Franklyn would have figured them out by now?”

Zane glanced at Ralph, thinking. “How do we know he didn’t?”

“What do you mean?” James asked.

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time somebody had discovered some terrible secret and then just sat on it. You heard him in the vision. Even if he did find out the secrets of the Nexus Curtain, it wasn’t like he wanted to go out and share it with the world. He just wanted to shut it down or guard it, so nothing could get through from either side.”

“Including us, maybe?” Ralph said, raising his eyebrows.

James shook his head. “Maybe, but I doubt it. If Franklyn had figured out the truth of the Nexus Curtain, I think he’d have told us when we asked him about it. I mean, he obviously doesn’t want anyone snooping around about it, right? If he’d found it and shut it down, he’d just say so.”

Ralph frowned. “Why?”

“Because,” Zane answered, “we’re just a bunch of curious kids, right? If he could have killed the mystery for us by telling us that he’d already *found* the Nexus Curtain and closed it for good, then there’d be nothing left for us to be curious about. Set and spike. Good one, James.”

Ralph picked up the boot again. “Let’s take the relics back down to the restricted section and get out of here. I’ve had enough creepy mystery for now.”

Zane nodded. “Come on, then. We still have time to look up this Rowbitz dude tonight.”

“I’ll just wait up here, if you don’t mind,” James announced, shuffling his feet a little.

Zane glanced back, one eyebrow raised. “Sure, all right. What’s the matter? You still hinky about Patches hiding out in the shelves?”

James shook his head. “No. I just... there’s only the two relics. You guys don’t really need me. Hurry back, all right?”

Ralph nodded. “The sooner the better. Come on.”



A moment later, the door to the Archive's lower levels eased shut, leaving James alone in the hall of the Disrecorder.

He waited for a moment, listening intently, and then, when he was sure that Ralph and Zane had begun their descent to the restricted area, he reached into the back pocket of his jeans.

He'd been carrying Petra's dream story around in his pocket for days, folded into its seamless packet and encased in a plastic bag that he'd found in the kitchen of Apollo Mansion. He didn't know for sure why he had started keeping it with him, except that it seemed safer, somehow. He held the plastic bag gingerly between his thumb and forefinger and turned toward the Disrecorder.

The idea had come to him while they'd been watching the vision of Franklyn. The Disrecorder was only supposed to work on objects that had been especially enchanted, of course, but James couldn't help wondering. Ever since he had saved Petra's life on the back the *Gwyndemere*, the dream story had become too magical for him to touch directly. Perhaps, however, it was just magical enough to trigger something in the Disrecorder, something James could make sense of. James couldn't guess why Petra and her dream story seemed to possess such strange magical intensity, but he meant to find out. Even if it meant that he was, essentially, spying on her dreams. Gingerly, he tipped the plastic bag upside down over the stone bowl.

The parchment packet tumbled out and fell into the bowl with a tiny thump.

A gust of dry wind pushed past James suddenly, whipping his hair and forcing him to squint. He turned around on the spot, and dull brightness filled his vision. He was in daylight, standing atop a grassy plateau. The hall of the Archive had completely vanished. Even the stone pedestal of the Disrecorder itself was gone. This, James realized, was no hazy vision; it felt utterly solid, and yet surreal, as if every blade of dead grass was watching him and every cloud in the low, heaving sky was glowering down at him, coldly angry. The featureless grass of the plateau stretched away in all directions and James realized that the plateau was actually an island, surrounded by craggy cliffs. Slate grey waves slammed against the cliffs, sending spray up into the windy air.

And of course, there was the castle, jutting up in the near distance. It was made of black stone, small but so tall, so encrusted with towers and turrets, that it seemed to claw at the cloudy sky. The structure loomed over the edge of the cliff, as if the rocks had eroded away beneath it, and yet the castle still stood, held up by sheer bloody-minded determination.

Someone was watching from the darkness of the castle. James sensed the weight of their gaze like hot stones on his skin. He peered up at the castle, shading his eyes against the grey light. A figure was standing on a high balcony, obscured in shadow.

*I have come*, a voice said. The words echoed over the grassy plateau like thunder. *I watch and I wait. My time is very near. I am the Sorceress Queen. I am the Princess of Chaos.*

James strained his eyes, trying to see past the shadowy dimness of the balcony. He could barely make out the figure except that it appeared to be a woman. Her hair streamed darkly in the wind. When she spoke again, a slow chill came over James, freezing him to the spot. His eyes widened, and the vision began to intensify, to bleed and pulse, to shred apart, but the words rang on, echoing louder and louder, pounding James' ears to the point of pain.

*I watch and I wait, the voice repeated. My name will be known throughout all of the destinies. My name... is Morgan. She who strides between the worlds.*

The vision shattered and flew apart. Darkness swirled, compressed, and vanished into a single dark point, which hovered over the pedestal of the Disrecorder like a hole in space. A moment later, even that winked from view.

James stood rooted to the floor of the hall, his hair sticking up and his heart pounding.

*It's just a dream, he told himself, repeating the words over and over. It's just that part of Petra's mind—the Morgan part—wanting to get out. Petra has it locked away, imprisoned, under control. That's all it is. That must be all it is...*

James shuddered violently, remembering the hopeless toll of that dreaming voice.

Footsteps approached, accompanied by echoing voices; Zane and Ralph were returning. Quickly, James stepped forward to retrieve the dream story, but then he stopped, his eyes widening.

The bowl of the Disrecorder was empty. Petra's dream story had completely vanished.

*Thus finishes chapter fourteen. What did you think?*

Tomorrow's chapter will be released at noon, CST, via [www.jamespotterseries.com](http://www.jamespotterseries.com). In the meantime, come on over to the [Grotto Keep forum](#) to discuss what's happened thus far.