



15. THE STAR OF CONVERGENCE

Now that the Alma Aleron Halloween Ball had officially come and gone, the campus got down to the serious business of unwinding toward the winter holidays.

No sooner had the floating pumpkins in the cafeteria been taken down than a collection of papier-mâché turkeys and strange buckled hats had gone up in their place. Thanksgiving, the holiday that, according to Professor Sanuye, celebrated the successful harvest of the first American pilgrims (with the help and cooperation of the Native Americans whom they'd met there) seemed to be a surprisingly big deal among the Alma Aleron students and faculty. Most of them were making plans to go home over the long weekend, where they would apparently eat lots of roasted turkey, mashed potatoes, and pumpkin pie and listen to or attend a lot of commemorative sporting events, including a blockbuster professional Clutchcudgel match known as the Superbrawl.

Curious about the details of such a quintessentially American holiday, James and Ralph shamelessly invited themselves to Zane's family home near St. Louis, Missouri for the Walker's Thanksgiving dinner. Zane's father, communicating via James' owl, Nobby, happily agreed to host the boys.

Thus, on the last weekend of November, the three boys traveled by train to a small old station in the quaint little city of Kirkwood, which Zane proudly proclaimed as 'the first official suburb of St. Louis'. This fact was woefully lost on James and Ralph, however, who were both preoccupied with the narrow, snow-dusted streets and brightly lit Christmas decorations that

adorned the city's lampposts. As the three boys waited in the purple dusk for Zane's parents to pick them up, they peered across the street to where a gaggle of gaily dressed Muggles milled around an artificial forest of neatly cut and arranged pine trees. Occasionally, a minivan or car would motor out onto the street with one of the trees tied to the roof by a length of twine.

"People around here get started early with their Christmases, don't they?" Ralph said with a happy smile. "I could get used to that, I bet."

"That's nothing," Zane replied. "There's a family in the block next to my house that leaves their Christmas tree up all year long. True story."

James frowned. "Are they magical folk?"

"Nah," Zane answered easily. "They're just weird. Here comes my mom!"

The boys waved and collected their duffle bags as a white car pulled into the circle drive that fronted the train station. It still gave James an odd sensation whenever he saw someone driving from the left side of the car, but Zane, of course, thought nothing of it. He climbed into the front seat with his mother, an attractive blonde woman wearing tortoise-shell glasses. She smiled back at Ralph and James as they clambered into the back.

"Hi boys," she announced, offering each one a cookie from a paper bag. "Welcome to Kirkwood. Hope you're hungry."

"I am," Ralph agreed eagerly. "Mmm! Chocolate chip cookies. And are those chunks of cherry?"

"Still hot too!" Zane nodded, his mouth full.

"Just came out of the oven ten minutes ago," Zane's mother concurred, steering the car back out onto the street. "Greer stayed home with her father, watching the last batch, but she's just as excited as we are to have you all over for the holiday."

James watched the small town unroll past the windows of the car until they reached a neighborhood of little houses and neat yards, not unlike the area surrounding the Alma Aleron gate. Zane's mother slowed and angled up a short drive toward a simple stone house perched on a hill.

"Home sweet home!" Zane announced eagerly, already opening his door. "Dad's got the fire going, I bet!"

"That's not very hard," his mother commented. "It's a gas fireplace. But I'm sure you're right."

As the four climbed out of the car, the back door of the house swept open and a head of curly blonde hair poked out, lit brightly by the overhead light.

"Dad's carving the turkey," the girl called, "but I can't get him to stop eating it as he goes. You better get in here right away."

Zane's mother sighed with weary affection.

“Hi Greer!” Zane called to his younger sister, waving, and then turned to James and Ralph, shaking his head happily. “Some things never change. Come on inside, I’ll show you my room!”

Thanksgiving at the Walker family home turned out to be not unlike any family gathering that James had known back at Marble Arch. The dining room was rather small, and by the time Zane’s aunt and uncle had arrived with their two younger children, the house rang with a cacophony of overlapping sounds: laughter and conversation, the clank of dishes, the burble of Christmas carols from the kitchen radio, the staccato of clambering footsteps as Zane’s cousins and sister ran about the small house. Zane and Ralph spent a goodly amount of time playing video games on the family television, although James could never quite get the hang of them. The food was excellent and apparently never-ending, so that by Thanksgiving evening, James felt utterly stuffed. The family gathered around the table to play board games and James joined in, even though he had never heard of any of the games, and had no idea how to play them.

“Sorry, James,” Zane announced happily as James marched his marker around the board. “You owe me two hundred bucks. Enjoy your commute, and thank you for patronizing Reading Railroad.”

“He’s ruthless about those railroads,” Ralph commented as James counted out the last of his brightly colored play money. “If I had known how much money those could make, I wouldn’t have wasted all mine on these stupid utilities.”

James had no idea what any of it meant, but he didn’t mind. It was an excellent time, no matter what. He grinned as he handed the play money to Zane, and reached for one of the last cookies on a nearby plate. One more bite couldn’t hurt. He decided he’d take chocolate-cherry cookies over fake money any day.

Over the course of the holiday weekend, James and Ralph shared the Walkers’ guest bedroom, sleeping on a pair of narrow old beds. On Sunday afternoon, while Ralph, Zane and Greer played video games, James explored the small house alone. In the small corner office, he found Mr. Walker hunched over his desk, tapping furiously away at a laptop computer. His face was tense and scowling, as if he was wrestling with the tiny keys.

“What’re you working on?” James asked, leaning in the doorway.

Walker looked up, his eyes wide and surprised, and James realized that the man hadn’t noticed his approach.

“Ah!” he said, and smiled. “Sorry. I get pretty wrapped up in this sometimes. Hi James.”

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you or anything,” James said quickly. “I was just curious.”

Walker sighed and leaned back in his chair, stretching. “It’s fine. I need people to remind me to take a break sometimes. Zane’s mother says that when I’m writing, it’s like I’m a hundred feet underwater. It takes a long time to get down there, and a long time to swim back to the surface, so when I am there, it’s easy to forget everything else.”

“I thought you made movies?” James asked, frowning.

Walker shrugged and bobbed his head. “I make stuff,” he said. “Sometimes I make things for movies, sometimes I draw pictures, sometimes I write stories.”

James was curious. “Do people read what you write? Like, are your stories in bookstores and stuff?”

Walker laughed and shook his head. “No, my books don’t end up on any store shelves. Fortunately, though, I do get paid for the *other* things I make. Well enough, in fact, that I have the freedom to do *some* things just for the fun of it. That’s what the writing is for.”

James frowned quizzically. “You write for fun?”

“No better reason,” Walker sighed, flexing his fingers.

“So what are you writing now?”

Walker pursed his lips and shook his head. “Just a little story.”

James narrowed his eyes at the man. For some reason, he suspected that Mr. Walker was purposely avoiding any further explanation. James peered toward the screen of the laptop. Without his glasses, the image was merely a blur of lines, but he thought he could make out a group of words in boldface. The title, perhaps? For a moment, he thought he saw his own name there. He shook his head and blinked. That was ridiculous, of course.

Mr. Walker turned the computer slightly, and clicked a button. The text on the screen disappeared.

James noticed a small volume perched on the end of the desk. He gestured toward it. “Is that one of your books?”

Walker scooped the book up. “This? No. This is a classic. I was using it for research. It’s called ‘Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde’. Ever hear of it?”

James shook his head.

“It’s an old story,” Walker said, letting the book fall open on his palm. “A horror story, but a psychological one. That’s what makes it so scary, really.”

“What do you mean?” James asked, peering at the book.

Walker flipped the pages until he came to an illustration. In it, a man in coat-tails and a top hat was standing before a floor-length mirror. He was staring with wide-eyed terror at his own reflection, and it was no wonder: the reflection in the mirror was a different man entirely. The figure in the mirror was leering, grinning, with hands hooked into claws and boggling, mad eyes.

“Because,” Walker replied thoughtfully, “this isn’t just a story about a madman wreaking havoc on the innocent. This is a story where the villain and the hero cannot physically fight one another, where there is no clear-cut moment of confrontation between them, where one can win out over the other.”

James stared at the image on the page and felt a pall of uneasiness settle over him. “Why not?” he asked in a low voice.

“Well, it’s very simple,” Walker said, glancing up at James seriously. “It’s because the villain and the hero... are the same person.”

James nodded slowly, unable to take his eyes away from the illustration on the page. In it, two different personalities stared at each other from within the same body, divided only by the mirror glass.

In the warmth of the small office room, James shivered.

A moment later he dismissed himself and went to find Zane and Ralph. All of a sudden, he wanted nothing more than to be around his friends, to hear their raucous laughter, and to forget that strange, old illustration.

The return trip to Alma Aleron, like all post-holiday journeys, was melancholy and quiet. Zane spent the train ride with his nose buried in a thick book called *The Varney Guide to Who’s Who in the Wizarding World*. James tried to read over his shoulder at one point, but almost immediately found the book unforgivably boring. Instead, he challenged Ralph to a game of wizard chess, using a miniature box set of chess pieces that Ralph had taken to carrying with him wherever he went. James hated playing chess with Ralph since he nearly always lost to the bigger boy, but even losing was better than simply staring out the windows at the passing, dreary cities and rainy sky.

The next day, Zane cornered Ralph and James in the hall outside of Mageography.

“I know who Rowbitz is,” he said, his eyes bulging in his face.

“What?” Ralph frowned. “I thought you said he wasn’t anywhere in that book?”

“He wasn’t,” Zane agreed. “It was a complete waste of time. Now, my head’s all stuffed full of useless names and trivia, and all for nothing. Like, did you know that the wizard who invented the skim was some crazy dude named Vimrich who was just looking for a way to nap while he was riding his broom? He never got it to work--the flattened broom just kept flipping over and dropping him on the floor--but after he died, some of his nephews found the homemade brooms in his workshop and tried standing up on them. The rest is history.”

“Fascinating,” James said impatiently. “Get to the Rowbitz part.”

“Hey, if *I* had to learn it, *you* have to put up with hearing about it,” Zane proclaimed, poking James in the chest. “But anyway, when I took the book back to the library this morning, I noticed something hanging on the wall. You know how the Vampire girls are always making those charcoal etchings of the gravestones in the school cemetery? Well, a bunch of them are hanging up by the librarian’s desk; must have been some kind of class art project or something. The point is, guess whose name showed up on the one right by the return cart?”

“Rowbitz?” Ralph blinked, surprised.

Zane nodded eagerly. “Right there, plain as day! It was spelled a little different than I expected—R-O-E-bitz, but close enough to play Clutch, as we Zombies say. He was just some old guy from way back in the day, lived and worked here on campus, apparently. Probably he was like Magnussen’s servant or gardener or something!”

“The Nexus Curtain lies within the eyes of Roebitz,” James quoted, nodding. “Maybe the key to the Curtain is buried with the guy!”

“OH no,” Ralph raised his hands, palms out. “I’m not going and digging up any old graves.”

Zane put an arm around Ralph’s shoulders, standing on tiptoes to reach. “Don’t worry, Ralph,” he said soothingly. “We won’t need to dig anybody up, all right?”

“We won’t?” the bigger boy replied skeptically.

Zane shook his head. “Nah. I could tell by the etching that it was from a mausoleum. We don’t need to dig at all. We just need to pry the door open with a crowbar.”

“Oh,” Ralph sighed sarcastically. “Well, that’s loads better.”



Over the following days, James, Ralph, and Zane explored the campus cemetery, which was surprisingly large, huddled in the northwest corner of the campus and surrounded by a tall wrought-iron fence. Fortunately, the main gate was almost always left open, even at night, which meant that they wouldn’t have to climb the fence if they had to sneak in by moonlight. After a few attempts, the three finally found the mausoleum belonging to a wizard named Leopold Cromwel Roebitz, which sat embedded in a hill in the shadow of an ancient oak tree. The mausoleum door was made of copper, weathered to a pale green patina. Zane gripped the handle and gave it a tentative tug, but the door didn’t budge.

“Well, so much for Plan A,” he said, nodding. “Door’s locked. Anyone want to try an Unlocking Spell? How about you, Ralphinator? You’re the spellmeister of the group.”

Ralph grimaced, but produced his wand. He leveled its lime green tip at the door. “*Alohomora*,” he said tentatively.

There was a golden flash, but the door remained firmly closed. Zane yanked the handle once more to no avail.

“I guess that means Plan C, eh?” James said.

Ralph asked hopefully, "Can't we just try it now?"

"And risk getting hauled into the office as vandals?" Zane replied, batting Ralph on the shoulder. "Trust me, it's one thing to get caught hexing your name onto a statue. Messing around with the dead means a whole different kind of trouble. You saw how serious they took it when Magnussen was stealing bodies to dissect them."

Ralph sighed. "Fine. But if we have to do this at night, *I'm* not going inside. I'll be waiting right here next to this old tree while you two go bumping around with the skeletons. Got it?"

James agreed. "Wouldn't have it any other way, Ralph."

It was the following weekend before the three boys could summon the courage to make the nighttime trek to the cemetery. Even Zane, whose audacity normally seemed to be limitless, appeared jumpy about the endeavor. On Saturday night, James and Ralph stayed up late in the game room of Apollo Mansion, playing ping pong and enduring the constant critiques of Heckle and Jeckle. Finally, when the grandfather clock in the corner struck midnight, the boys crept up the stairs and eased open the front door. They looked at each other, standing between the coldness of the night and the warmth of the hall behind them.

"You up for this, Ralph?" James asked in a whisper.

"No," Ralph admitted. "But we're going to do it anyway, right?"

James nodded and gulped. "Remember why we're doing it. It's for a good cause. We can't let Petra take the blame for something she didn't do. We have to find the people who really broke into the Hall of Archives and attacked the Vault of Destinies."

Ralph shook his head. "But... we *saw* her, James. What makes you so sure that it wasn't really her?"

In the past, James would have felt angry about such a question, but he knew Ralph better now. He knew that Ralph was a pragmatist. Besides, Ralph didn't feel the same way about Petra that James did. He didn't know what James knew.

"Because she told me," James said simply, meeting his friend's gaze. After a moment, he added, "When we were on the ship, Dad told me that the best thing I could do for Petra was to be her friend. Friends trust one another, and that's what I am doing for her. Do you trust me?"

Ralph shrugged. "Sometimes," he answered seriously. "But mostly I just back your plays. That's the best way *I* know how to be a friend. That's what tonight's about. I hope that's good enough."

James smiled despite the cold and stillness of the night. Slowly, he pulled the door of Apollo Mansion closed behind them. "That's more than good enough, Ralph. Come on."

As James and Ralph stole into the darkness, they found the campus eerily quiet, covered in low, creeping tendrils of fog. The air was so cold that James immediately began to shiver. Overhead, the half moon shone brightly, covering the lawns and footpaths with its bony light.

“Over there,” Ralph whispered, his breath making puffs of mist in the air. “Is that Zane hunkered down by the Octosphere?”

In answer, a poor imitation of an owl echoed across the dark lawn. James rolled his eyes.

“You didn’t do the countersign,” Zane rasped as James and Ralph ran to join him. “I hoot, *you* bray like wolves. We practiced it this afternoon.”

“And I told you *then*,” James whispered, looking about at the empty campus, “we’re in a time bubble in the middle of major American city. There aren’t any wolves for miles and centuries in every direction!”

“There would’ve been if you’d have done the countersign,” Zane grouched.

“Did you bring the Grint?” James asked, glancing at the blonde boy.

Zane hugged himself, shivering. “You mean the standard Zombie tool for magically picking locks that any self-respecting Zombie carries with him every time he goes out on an evening sneak? *That* Grint? No, I left it in your grandma’s sock drawer. Silly me.”

James nodded. “All right, then. Looks like the coast is clear. Let’s go.”

Together, the three boys ran along a line of leafless elms, hunkering low and keeping as much in shadow as possible. They skirted the front of the theater, crossed the mall in front of Administration Hall, and ducked into the warren of footpaths that ran through a block of college student apartments. Finally, his lungs raw from the cold night air, James looked up and saw the gates of the campus cemetery gaping open before him. Tentacles of mist crept like lazy ghosts between the nearest gravestones, beyond which was impenetrable darkness.

“Why’s there have to be so many big willow trees and shrubberies and stuff?” Ralph whispered as they tiptoed through the gates. “I mean, it’s a cemetery, not a hedge maze.”

“Blame it on the old groundskeeper, Balpine Bludgeny,” James replied, his teeth chattering. “He’s what you call a traditionalist. Makes sure all the gates creak, all the trees are covered with Spanish moss, and the headstones lean *just so*. Gotta love a guy who takes that kind of pride in his work.”

The three boys huddled unconsciously together as they followed the winding path through the hills of the cemetery. Shortly, they rounded a curve and found themselves out of sight of the main entrance. Moss-covered statues and obelisks loomed in silhouette out of the misty shadows. Not so much as a breath of wind moved the trees or the ever-present ground mist.

“I think it’s over there,” Ralph whispered, pointing up a nearby hill. “Can’t we light our wands?”

Zane shook his head. “Somebody will see us. Your eyes will get used to the dark soon enough.”

James led the way up the hill, skirting the leaning headstones. Suddenly, unbidden, he remembered his father’s infrequent stories about the last days before the Battle of Hogwarts, when he and Headmaster Dumbledore had broken into a cave where Voldemort had hidden one of his many

Horcruxes. Specifically, James found himself thinking of the cursed dead that occupied that cave's deep lake, flailing to the surface like beastly, gaping fish: *Inferi*. James shuddered and tried not to envision dead white hands scrabbling up out of the ground, clutching at his ankles. He actually found himself hoping for a good old-fashioned ghost, just to break the tension. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, Alma Aleron apparently didn't have any ghosts. He drew a deep breath and shuddered as he let it out.

"There it is," Zane nodded, angling toward the crest of the hill. "*Roebitz*. I can just read it by the light of the moon. Come on."

James watched as Zane retrieved a small complicated tool from a pocket in the recesses of his cloak. The blonde boy examined the keyhole beneath the mausoleum's door handle and then peered down to fiddle with the Grint.

"How's it work?" Ralph asked, leaning close.

"It's got a little imp locksmith in it," Zane replied. "He sniffs out what sort of lock he's dealing with and pops out whatever tool is best to get it open."

Ralph frowned and glanced at James. "Is he making that up?"

"You never can tell, can you?" James answered, shaking his head.

Zane leaned close to the door, squinted into the keyhole, and then pressed an ear to the cold metal, listening. "Nobody moving around inside," he said, peering back at James and Ralph. "Always a good sign."

James was impatient. "Can you get it open?"

"No problem," Zane nodded. "Nothing special here. Looks like a standard Mourning Rose double-tongued turnbolt. I looked them up this afternoon at the library. It's a basic mortuary homunculus lock. The key is tears."

"Like, one of us has to cry?" James asked, blinking.

Ralph frowned. "How do you cry on command? Maybe you should try it, James. You're the actor, aren't you?"

"I've only ever been in one play," James protested. "And it didn't require any waterworks. I don't know how to make myself cry."

Ralph's eyes widened with inspiration. "You just think about the saddest thing that's ever happened to you! Like, when your first pet died or something! It's easy!"

"I've never *had* any pets die yet," James replied. "If it's so easy, *you* do it then."

"You guys coming in or what?" Zane asked, pushing the copper door open. It creaked ponderously, revealing darkness beyond.

James boggled. "How'd you do that?"

“I just picked it,” Zane shrugged, pocketing the Grint. “I figured that’d be faster than waiting for you to get all misty-eyed. I think I broke the lock a little, but we can fix it on the way out, eh? Let’s go.”

“I’ll, er, keep watch,” Ralph whispered nervously, backing away. James nodded, sighed, and then followed Zane into the musty darkness of the mausoleum.

It was very cold inside with a low ceiling and a gritty floor that scraped loudly under the boys’ feet. Zane raised his wand slowly.

“*Lumos*,” he whispered harshly. The wand sprang alight, filling the tiny space with its harsh glow. The interior of the mausoleum was completely unmarked. Cobwebs filled the corners, wafting with the boys’ movements. The only objects in the cramped space were an old floor brazier with one remaining candle and a low stone shelf, upon which sat the unmistakable shape of a wooden casket.

“I opened the front door,” Zane said in a low voice, eyes wide. “Now that we’re inside, *you* can do the honors.”

James gulped and stepped forward. The casket was cold to the touch. Slowly, he curled his fingers around the metal handle of the casket’s lid and began to lift it. It creaked loudly as it opened, and James wondered for a moment if Balpine Bludgeny had been in here as well, hexing the hinges of the casket so that they made the proper deep groan when opened in the dead of night. James leaned aside and peered into the narrow opening he’d created. A wash of relief flooded over him.

“It’s empty,” he breathed. “Just darkness. It must be a dummy grave, set up as a hiding place for the—”

James interrupted himself with a little shriek as Zane stepped forward, bringing his lit wand with him. The casket wasn’t empty after all; the interior had merely been obscured by shadow. A mouldering skeleton lay inside, dressed in an old-fashioned suit with a string tie and a desiccated carnation lying flat in the buttonhole. The skeletal hands were crossed neatly over the thin chest. A gold tooth glimmered in the skull’s leering grin.

“Ugh!” James said, nearly dropping the casket’s lid. “Urk!”

Zane shook his head impatiently. “It’s just a dead body, James. Sheesh. I thought you saw one of these come to life once in the cave of Merlin’s cache?”

James gulped again. “That was different, somehow. *He* was just out there in the open, like. You don’t think this one’s going to... you know...?”

“Get lively on us?” Zane asked, grinning. “Nah. Not unless you make him really mad, anyway. Let’s get on with it. Like Magnussen said, the Nexus Curtain lies within the eyes of Roebitz. Let’s take a look, already.”

James pushed the casket lid the rest of the way open and Zane leaned over the top of it, bringing his wand low. The skull grinned up at the light. A shock of grey hair was still matted onto the skull, combed neatly back from the temples.

“Nothing in the eye sockets,” Zane said, leaning close. “Just dust and a few cobwebs. Maybe somebody did beat us to it.”

“The riddle said that the Nexus Curtain was *within the eyes* of Rowbitz,” James mused. “Maybe it means that it’s somewhere where the skeleton could see it?”

Zane shrugged. “Skeletons can’t see anything, technically.”

James ignored Zane and peered at the padded silk of the inside of the casket’s lid. He touched it tentatively, feeling around for any hidden shapes.

“Hey!” Zane announced suddenly, leaning low over the casket again. James gasped and bent over the skeleton, following his friend’s intent gaze. Zane pointed at the skeleton’s left hand.

“He graduated in eighteen ten! Look! It’s right there on his class ring. He was in Aphrodite Heights. Wow, I wouldn’t have guessed him for a Pixie.”

James sighed and straightened again. “Great. Well, this looks like another dead end.”

“Hah hah,” Zane grinned, nudging James with his elbow.

“Let’s go. I’m freezing,” James said, lowering the casket’s lid with another long creak. “Maybe there isn’t anything to all of this after all. Maybe Magnussen was just playing with Franklyn, giving him meaningless hints.”

Zane shrugged and extinguished his wand. Both boys turned and crept back out into the night.

“Ralph?” Zane rasped loudly, glancing around.

“Where is he?” James asked, peering around as well. “I thought he was going to be sitting here under this—” He stopped, noticing a dark shape lying flattened on the frosty ground beneath the elm tree. It was Ralph’s cloak. Zane saw it too and glanced up at James, his eyes widening.

“Ralph?” James whispered, peering around at the shadowy gravestones. Suddenly, the graveyard seemed to be packed full of hiding places and dark recesses, where any number of awful things might be watching, preparing to pounce. Nervously, James rasped, “This isn’t funny, Ralph!”

A noise came from behind the nearby elm tree: a heavy thump. Both boys jumped and grabbed at one another.

“Ralph?” Zane asked, his voice quavering.

Another thump sounded, closer this time. James and Zane began to back away, peering around for the source of the strange noises. The graveyard sat perfectly still, as if watching them. An owl hooted suddenly, sounding very loud and horribly mournful. James looked about wildly, his hair prickling.

“Ralph?” Zane whispered once more, still gripping James’ elbow. “Is that you?”

Suddenly, both boys backed into a large, solid object. They stopped, eyes bulging. Slowly, terrified, they turned around, and looked up.

A very tall, vaguely human shape loomed over them. The skin of its face was papery, partly rotted away, revealing the mottled skull beneath. Two large bony hands raised slowly into the air, hooked into claws, and a deep rattling voice emanated from the thing's throat.

"Get... out... of... my... *yaaard!*" it said menacingly.

James and Zane nearly collapsed in terror, scrambling away from the awful figure. Just then, however, another voice spoke up some distance away.

"That's what he told me at first too," the voice said, speaking as if through a mouthful of biscuit. James tore his gaze from the figure that loomed over him, seeking the source of the second voice. Ralph stood in the open doorway of another mausoleum, happily munching a large pink sugar cookie. He shrugged. "He's really just a big softie. Name's Straidthwait. Says he used to be president of your house, Zane."



"Charles Straidthwait," the zombie introduced himself once the three boys were seated inside his mausoleum. Despite his morbid appearance, the figure's speech had a disarming Southern lilt that Zane later claimed was a Charleston, South Carolina accent. "Former President of Hermes House, Arithmetics professor, retired, at your service. You'll have to excuse me for all that creeping and thumping and grumpiness. Comes with the territory, I'm afraid."

"He's the one I told you guys about," Zane enthused happily, accepting a cup of hot coffee from the shambling figure. "He's the Zombie House President that traveled to the darkest jungles and got himself turned into the real thing!"

“A word of advice,” Straidthwait nodded, easing himself into a chair, “never accept any smoking ‘peace potions’ from a witch doctor whose hut you’ve accidentally burned to the ground. Long story. Suffice it to say, here I am, dead and loving it.”

“I’ve seen your mausoleum loads of times,” Zane said, grinning, “but the door was always closed and everything was quiet. We all just assumed that you spent all your time sort of sleeping or something. Like being a real-life zombie was just a big long Rip Van Winkle nap, like!”

“If only that were so,” the undead teacher lamented. “I’ve had trouble sleeping for the last decade or so. I don’t have any trouble *getting* to sleep, mind, but I wake up early, usually after only three or four months. Age takes its toll. Er, I do apologize,” Straidthwait said, leaning forward and plucking something from the edge of Zane’s saucer. “Pinky finger,” he said apologetically, holding the digit up. “Keeps coming off lately. Maybe you boys would be kind enough to bring me some plumber’s putty and tape if you decided to come by again?”

Ralph nodded. “Nice place you have here, I gotta say. I’m surprised.”

“No reason you should be,” Straidthwait replied, looking around at the cramped space. It was, indeed, rather nicely laid out, with four upholstered (if slightly moldy) chairs, a small ornate coffee table, and two kerosene lamps, all arranged upon a threadbare oriental rug. Straidthwait’s coffin lay open on its shelf, neatly made like a bed. In the corner nearest the door sat a tiny potbelly stove, supporting a kettle and a small tin percolator. It was almost unbearably hot inside the stone mausoleum, but none of the boys minded.

“I dictated exactly how I wished to be interred,” Straidthwait went on proudly. “Including an afterlifetime supply of iced cookies, coffee, tea, and condensed milk. Stuff goes straight through me these days, but I don’t mind. Hard to experience indigestion if one no longer sports a stomach. Good riddance, I say. So who, may I ask, are the three of you, and what brings you out to my neck of the woods at such an hour?”

Over the next few minutes, the boys introduced themselves and explained their mission to the patiently decrepit corpse of Professor Straidthwait, describing the attack on the Hall of Archives, Petra’s alleged involvement, and their attempts to find the real culprits. Once James had finished relating the Disrecorded visions of Professor Magnussen and his two riddles, Straidthwait nodded to himself meaningfully.

“I remember it well, actually,” he said, peering up at the ceiling with his one remaining eye. “I was still a student when the Magnussen ruckus occurred. My friends and I, as well as most of the school, were completely maddened by it. It was one thing to break the code of secrecy and torture people. But to kill a defenseless Muggle woman, and one as young as Fredericka Staples...” Straidthwait shook his head slowly. “Abominable. Unforgivable.”

James asked, “Did you know her?”

“No, no,” Straidthwait admitted. “Not until after it was over, when her name appeared in all of the newspapers of both the magical and Muggle varieties. After Magnussen’s escape, there was a lengthy investigation by the Magical Integration Bureau, months and months of very ticklish interactions between the Muggle and wizarding powers that be. By the end of it, none of us would

ever forget the poor woman's name or that of her murderer, that horrible psychopath, Ignatius Magnussen."

Zane sat forward in his chair. "So what about this whole Roebitz riddle business? Do you think there's anything to it?"

Straidthwait let out a rattly sigh and tapped his coffee cup with one bony index finger. "I barely knew Professor Magnussen as anything more than a rather feared professor, and then as a famous escaped murderer, but I don't think he'd leave meaningless clues. He was too arrogant for that. Still, I'd have a difficult time believing that poor old Leo Roebitz had anything to do with it. He hadn't even died yet when Magnussen disappeared. No, I'm afraid you boys are chasing the proverbial feral waterfowl."

James released a disappointed sigh. "Now we'll never find out where the Nexus Curtain is," he muttered.

Straidthwait perked up a little at that. "Did you actually think," he said, peering at James, "that the Nexus Curtain would be found inside the casket of a dead wizard literature teacher?"

James bristled a little. "Well, it's magic, isn't it? It could be anywhere. We were just following the clues."

"Yes," Straidthwait chuckled drily. "I suppose that *is* one way to go about it. Following clues. Of course, if it were me, I'd follow Magnussen himself, instead."

"How are we going to do that?" Zane asked, tilting his head. "He's only been vanished for a hundred and fifty years or so."

"Yeah," Ralph added. "And nobody saw where he went anyway. They were all too busy watching his house burn down."

"It wasn't his house," Straidthwait replied pedantically, raising a skeletal finger. "It was the house of John Danforth Roberts, one of the three founders of this school, God rest his soul. And I wouldn't be quite so hasty about who saw what on that particular night."

James narrowed his eyes at the mouldering professor. "What do you mean?"

"I'd imagine it was quite obvious at this point," Straidthwait said, making a rather ghastly smile. "I witnessed Magnussen's escape."

"But," Ralph began, squinting thoughtfully. "But, Franklyn said, in the Disrecorder vision, that nobody saw Magnussen escape. He said they were all too distracted by the fire."

"Alas, I had my own reasons for keeping my observations a secret," Straidthwait admitted, leaning back in his chair. "Not that they'd have done anyone any good, I suspect."

Zane asked, "Is there a story that goes with that?"

"Not much of a one, I'm afraid," Straidthwait sighed. "You see, I had recently become enamored with a fetching young lady by the name of Charlotte. She lived in Erebus Mansion and had a delightfully wicked mind. She occupied me for many hours during that autumn—hours that

would have been far more responsibly spent on my studies. As a result, I was failing Mageography quite disastrously. My teacher, Professor Howard Styrnwether, had confronted me about my failing grades, demanding that I not throw my future away for some ‘made-up strumpet’, as he called her.

“He was right, of course, but I was *livid*. In fury, I abandoned the Mageography essay I had barely begun and instead wrote an entirely new essay consisting of precisely five words, which glowed green on the parchment and read as follows: ‘Dearest Professor Styrnwether—Get Stuffed.’”

Zane hooted with laughter. “That’s excellent! I see why you were President of Zombie House.”

Straidthwait nodded, smiling despite himself. “Yes, well, I might never have achieved such a position if it had not been for the events that followed. You see, I handed the essay in after a night of affronted anger, emboldened by Charlotte herself and not a few Dragonmeades in the Kite and Key. Almost instantly, however, I regretted the act. If Styrnwether failed me in Mageography, the chances were that I would never get accepted to the graduate school, and if I didn’t get accepted to the graduate school, I’d never receive my doctorate in Advanced Arithmetics, which meant I could never become a teacher and grow to be the distinguished and revered undead professor you see before you now.

“Thus, I pined for a means to retrieve the essay before it was too late. Unfortunately, Professor Styrnwether had already begun grading the essays. I hovered near his office door, peeking in, looking for any opportunity to sneak in and steal back the insulting essay. Styrnwether, unfortunately, did not pause for so much as a bathroom break, and I began to fear the worst.

“Shortly, however, I overheard the brouhaha stewing in the lawn outside. I looked out a nearby window and saw the crowd gathering, saw the flames beginning to lick from the lower windows of Magnussen’s residence. I had heard about the travesty of Magnussen’s crimes, of course, and knew that tensions had been mounting, ever since the decision had been made to allow him to maintain his post during the investigation.

“I immediately ran out to join the mob, as much out of curiosity as malice, although, I admit, there *was* some malice in my own thoughts as well. As the night drew in and the flames grew brighter and hotter, enveloping the unfortunate home of the former John Roberts, I spied, in the milling crowd, the humorless features of Professor Styrnwether. He was watching from a distance, his arms folded disapprovingly.

“Perhaps it is a testament to my own sense of self-preservation, but I found myself immediately inspired. At once, I darted away from the flames, into the nearby faculty offices. The halls were completely deserted, of course, and I breathed a great sigh of relief as I retrieved my essay, ungraded, from the stack on Professor Styrnwether’s desk.

“I immediately produced my wand and obliterated the damning parchment. Finding a new parchment in the professor’s desk, I quickly scribbled an apology for the fact that my essay would be a day late and promised to accept with good grace whatever penalty he deemed such tardiness deserved. I slipped this back into the stack of essays and, feeling a hundred pounds lighter, made my way back out into the darkening evening.

“It was then, as I was skirting the buildings, some distance from the conflagration, that I saw him. Professor Magnussen was an unmistakable figure, tall and solid, with stony features and a crown of very short grey hair. I feared for a moment that he had seen me and ducked into the bushes next to the guest house. The professor strode on, however, his gait full of purpose, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I feared him, you see, on that night more than any other. I considered bravery, but only for a moment. I was only a student, of course, and Magnussen was a much feared wizard, even before he was known to be a torturer and a murderer. Thus, I watched.”

James was spellbound. “Where did he go? Did you see him open the Nexus Curtain?”

Straidthwait shook his head. “I did not. The truth is, if indeed Magnussen did escape through the Nexus Curtain, then he did not do so immediately. He left the campus first. I watched him, even heard him, for my hiding place was quite near the Warping Willow. That is where he went. When he was under its branches, he spoke only one word. A moment later, he vanished. As far as I know, no witch or wizard ever saw him again.”

There was a moment of tense silence as the boys thought about this. Finally, James said, “What was the one word?”

“The word was ‘*Abitus*’,” Straidthwait answered somberly. “It is a simple spell which conjures an exit to the currently relevant date and time—the now. Magnussen left the campus that night and escaped into Muggle Philadelphia. I know not where he was going, but if all the suspicions about him are true, I have my ideas.”

“You think he was going to the Nexus Curtain?” James asked, wide-eyed. “You think maybe it wasn’t on campus at all?”

“Perhaps,” Straidthwait shrugged slowly, and then leaned forward. In a rasping whisper, he added, “Or perhaps... he was going to get the key.”

“The key...,” Ralph repeated slowly. “Like, maybe whatever it was, it was too dangerous for him to keep on campus?”

“Because whatever it was,” Zane went on, realization dawning on him, “it would be way too magical to leave in his offices! People would sense something that powerful, especially if it came from another dimension!”

Straidthwait leaned back again, using his index finger to tap the side of where his nose used to be. “My thoughts precisely,” he concurred. “Because there is one thing that is for certain: whatever this alleged pan-dimensional key may have been, Magnussen was *not* carrying it on his person that night. If so, he’d never have been able to escape unnoticed. He may well have been on his way to the Nexus Curtain, *if* such a thing truly exists, but if he was... *then he was going to retrieve the key first.*”

“So,” Ralph announced after a meaningful pause, “if we can somehow find a way to follow Magnussen... we can find the key.”

“Find the key,” Straidthwait mused, “and I expect the Nexus Curtain will reveal itself.”

Zane shook his head. “But how do we follow someone whose been gone for a century and a half?”

“Mercy, young man, you say you’re a member of Zombie House,” Straidthwait said, nodding at Zane. “I am surprised you haven’t already divined the answer to that question.”

“Give me a second, already,” Zane replied, piqued. “I’ve only had a minute to think about it.”

“And therein lies the solution, my friend.”

“How’s that?” James asked, somewhat frustrated. “Time is exactly our problem. Like, a hundred and fifty years worth of it.”

Straidthwait sighed wearily. “No, boy. Time is your *solution*. Have you forgotten,” he said, leaning slightly forward, his remaining eye twinkling, “that this school is, in essence, one gigantic *time machine*?”

Shocked, the three boys looked at one another, their eyes widening slowly. In the dark heat of the mausoleum, Straidthwait chuckled hollowly.



In the wake of the interview with Charles Straidthwait, James had gotten a vague idea of what they needed to do next. Unfortunately, with the Christmas holiday approaching, bringing with it a wave of midterm examinations, there was very little freedom to plan any time-traveling adventures in pursuit of the long lost Ignatius Magnussen.

“Tell me again why, exactly, you are planning to do this,” Rose asked disapprovingly from the Shard as James and Ralph practiced Shield Charms for the next day’s Cursology exam. “Pardon me for saying that it all seems a tad complicated and ridiculous.”

“It’s simple,” Ralph said, his tone of voice implying that he didn’t quite understand the plan himself. “Whoever broke into the Vault of Destinies stole a crimson thread from some other dimension’s version of the Loom. Normally, something that massively magical would be easy to track down since it’d be sending out waves of power like some kind of siren. For some reason, though, nobody’s picked up the slightest trace of it, not even James’ dad and the local police. Zane thinks that that’s because the people that stole the thread used it as a key to open the Nexus Curtain and hide it in the World Between the Worlds, which is sort of like a hub that connects all the dimensions.”

“Right,” James agreed. “That’s the only way the thieves could escape without being traced. We need to follow Magnussen into the past to nick *his* key to the Nexus Curtain. If we can figure out how to get through to the World Between the Worlds, then we can try to see who really did steal the thread and prove that Petra isn’t really involved.”

“And what will you do if this is all bilge and Morganstern really *is* the culprit?” Scorpius scowled from his side of the Shard. James had prepared himself for such a question.

“She’s not, but even if she is, this is what friends do. She says she’s innocent, and we’re doing what we can to prove her case.”

Scorpius narrowed his eyes and smirked slightly. “So you’re doing this for *friendship*, are you?”

“You can’t just rush into something like that anyway,” Rose interrupted. “Time traveling is extremely dangerous business. You could do far more harm than good.”

James sighed and rolled his eyes. He hadn’t wanted to tell Rose and Scorpius about it at all, but Ralph, being his typical self, had been unable to resist telling them all about the midnight conversation with the undead Professor Straidthwait.

“We know, Rose,” James proclaimed, trying to head her off. “It’s Technomancy one-oh-one, all right? Accidentally step on a bug in the past and you change the whole present. Blah, blah, blah.”

“But really, how bad can it be?” Ralph commented, sitting down on his bed. “I mean, James zapped himself a thousand years into the past and butted heads with Salazar Slytherin. He changed loads of things, but everything still seems just fine here in the present day.”

Rose shook her head in annoyance. “One,” she said, stabbing a finger into the air, “we don’t know that James *didn’t* change the present since everything we know is based on the history he affected. It may be that there *were* changes, but they weren’t terribly important. Two,” she stuck a second finger into the air, “just because James got lucky once, doesn’t mean the three of you won’t bollix things up royally this time out.”

“We’ll be careful, Rose,” James insisted, lowering his wand and turning toward the Shard. “I know you’re jealous because you can’t come along with us and all, but that doesn’t mean you have to try to scare us out of doing it.”

“That’s not it at all,” Rose fumed, crossing her arms and flopping back against the sofa in the Gryffindor common room. Next to her, Scorpius grinned a little crookedly, apparently seeing the truth in James’ words. “I’m smarter than you,” Rose went on sulkily. “I know how much damage you lot can do, tinkering about with history. *And* I know that you’ll barely think any of this out before you do it.”

James shook his head. “We’re plenty smart. We’ve thought about it loads.”

“Oh?” Rose replied, her eyebrows shooting up. “Is that so? Well, then I assume you’ve already realized that there’s no point in your attempting anything at all without first knowing *what*, precisely, this pan-dimensional key thing actually *is*?”

James rolled his eyes dramatically and spread his hands, as if to say, *well duh, of course we’ve already figured that much out*, but the effect was ruined by Ralph’s querulous response.

“Er, no,” he said, frowning, and James slumped. “We just thought we’d travel back to the day when Magnussen escaped and try to follow him into Muggle Philadelphia. He’d just lead us to the key, wouldn’t he?”

“Nice to know you’ve given this some serious thought,” Rose said wearily. “Have you asked yourselves how you’ll even *recognize* the key?”

James looked at Ralph for a moment, and then glanced back at the Shard. “Well, I mean, it’s a key. It’ll be obvious, er, won’t it?”

Scorpius spoke up now. “It could be anything, Potter. For instance, if your theory is accurate—and I’m not entirely sure that it is—then the ‘real thieves’, as you call them, have accessed this Nexus Curtain using a piece of red thread. Not exactly the most obvious pan-dimensional artifact in the world. Magnussen’s key could come in any shape or form. Were you perhaps planning on just walking up to him and saying, oi, Mr. Murderer sir, would you please be so kind as to give us this dimensional key thing, and never mind that we won’t know the difference if you just hand us a chunk of lint that you might happen to have in your pocket?” Scorpius smiled smugly at his wit.

“Well,” James began, but couldn’t immediately think of anything else to say. He glanced back at Ralph for help.

“We have another clue,” Ralph said, perking up. “Something about Erebus Castle. Magnussen said that the secret of the key walked around in the halls of Erebus Castle, or something like that. We just need to ask Lucy to take us on a tour. If we can figure out the riddle, then maybe we’ll know what the key is.”

“How hard can it be?” James nodded, grinning sheepishly.

Scorpius looked meaningfully at Rose as he asked James, “Why do you need Lucy’s permission to get into Erebus Castle?”

“That’s the House of the Vampires,” Ralph replied. “They’re totally wiggy about who they let inside to bump around. You have to get a member of Vampire House to chaperone you around the whole time.”

“*Or* you have to be a real-life vampire,” James added, rolling his eyes. “The President of their house, Professor Remora, says that Erebus Castle is a ‘sanctuary for any fellow wandering Children of the Night’. As if there are any of *those* in America.”

Rose looked vaguely disgusted. “Did she actually say that? Children of the Night?”

“She says loads of stuff like that,” James nodded. “She’s completely batty.”

“Hah hah!” Ralph added, nudging James with his elbow. James groaned.



As the final days of the autumn semester unwound, James spent most of his time cramming (as Zane called it) for his semifinals. His fellow Bigfoots were a great help in that endeavor, forming spontaneous study groups in the game room of Apollo Mansion. There, Jazmine Jade, Gobbins, Wentworth, Norrick, Mukthatch, and anyone else who happened to be in the same classes would produce all of their notes and quiz one another for hours on end, all while consuming vast quantities of licorice soda and snacks from the Apollo kitchen.

Occasionally, Yeats would drift through the room with a trash bag, collecting empty cans, cups, and candy wrappers, all the while muttering insincere apologies through his gritted teeth for interrupting the students’ studies. Heckle and Jeckle hung near the cellar refrigerator and called out wrong answers to any quiz questions they overheard. James learned that Heckle, the deer head,

answered wrongly on purpose, in the hopes of starting arguments with passersby. Jeckle, the moose head, however, got the answers wrong because he was, essentially, a moose head.

It was thanks to these study sessions, which often lasted well into the night, that James finished his last week of school before the Christmas break with a somewhat giddy sense of confidence. His final test, a three-page practical in Precognitive Engineering, was possibly the hardest of all. For the two-hour examination period, James and the rest of the students were given three separate divining tools—a small crystal ball, a cup of tea leaves, and a random selection of octocards—and instructed to recount on parchment their predictions, being careful to assure that they were a) accurate, b) measurable, and c) essentially in agreement.

This meant, James knew, that the second half of the test, which would occur sometime during the spring semester, would be a rigorous detailing of how the predictions did or did not come true. If this had been Professor Trelawney's class, James would have been less concerned about that second part—predictions for her class were always expected to be purposely vague and rather comically disastrous. The American Precog teacher, however, Professor Ham Thackery, was a fussy little man with a much different approach to the 'science of divination', as he called it. He frowned upon disastrous, major prophecies, preferring instead smaller, more measurable predictions regarding things like what color bird might next fly past a specific window, or the number of candies in a box of Every Flavor Beans, or what dishes the cafeteria might choose to serve for dinner on any given evening.

As a result, students had taken to spending inordinate amounts of energy attempting to steal advance copies of the menu from the head cook's desk in Administration Hall. James had joined Jazmine, Gobbins, and Wentworth on one such escapade and had succeeded in nicking a full menu plan for the entire month of December, right down to dessert options. Unfortunately, they had neglected to realize how far ahead the cook planned. It wasn't until after they had made their remarkably detailed class-time predictions that Wentworth had noticed that the menu plan was for December of the *following* year.

"Easy enough," Gobbins had proclaimed, flush with inspiration. "We just tell Thackery that our predictions are super advanced and won't come true until next year at this time!"

Against all probability, the plan had actually worked. Thackery had placed the students' predictions into a wall safe that he'd had installed for just such a purpose, explaining that he would grade the assignments in precisely one year, when the predictions could be measured.

For now, however, James still had twenty minutes of examination time left. Feeling sleepy and vaguely hungry for lunch, he set the crystal ball aside and reached for the handful of octocards. It was very still in the Precog classroom, which was high and dusty, lit by a bank of tall windows that ranged along the left side of the room. The windows were nearly opaque with curls of frost, reducing them to bright blindness. The only noises in the room were the busy scritch of quills on parchment and the occasional frustrated sigh and clunk as students shuffled their divining objects about on their desks.

James glanced around. Two desks to his right, Zane leaned over his parchment, writing furiously. The feather end of his quill shook wildly over his shoulder, as if he was systematically

choking it by the nib. James sighed quietly and turned over the first octocard on his desk. He looked down at it.

the LADY *of* MYSTERY

James blinked at the card. For a moment, the face of the dancing, smiling woman on the card had looked familiar. It had looked, in fact, like Petra Morganstern. James frowned and leaned over the card. It no longer looked like Petra, and yet it still looked familiar. Now, it looked like the strange woman that he had seen in the midnight halls of the Aquapolis and later aboard the *Zephyr* shooting hexes out of the windows without any visible wand. Who was she?

James' hair suddenly prickled. *It was her*, he thought. *She was the other woman that came out of the Hall of Archives right after it was attacked! How could I have forgotten? But who is she?* He peered down at the card, concentrating furiously. The woman on the card didn't move, and yet she almost seemed to be smirking up at him. For the first time, James felt a deep sense of dismay about what he had seen that night. Was it possible that this woman and Petra had really done it? Was the woman somehow controlling Petra? Where had she come from, and what was the source of her power? Was it the same as the mysterious power that Petra herself seemed to demonstrate? In the warmth of the classroom, James shuddered.

Slowly, he turned over another card.

the MAN *of* MIXED DESTINIES

James' eyes widened as he stared down at this card. He'd never seen it before—would have sworn, in fact, that there was no such card in a deck of octocards. Worse, however, he thought he recognized the face on this card as well: it was his own. The figure on the card was skinny, dressed in a quaint black suit with tails and an orange tie. Rather unsettlingly, however, the head had two faces, one looking right and smiling, the other looking left and frowning uncertainly. As James watched, the faces seemed to change places, to shift without moving. It made his eyes water and he blinked. With a shiver, he turned over another card, covering the first two.

the STAR *of* CONVERGENCE

James had seen this one before, of course—the four-point golden star. He had drawn it once last year, in Professor Trelawney's class. Back then, it hadn't seemed particularly meaningful. Now the sight of it atop the other two cards made his stomach drop slowly, as if he were standing on a high ledge, swaying perilously. The points of the star were like paths, merging together, forming something new and unknowable. He had a strange premonition that he was one of the four points.

The strange lady, with her enigmatic smile and sourceless magic, was another. But who were the other two?

Petra, he thought. *Of course, she's one of them.*

But that didn't feel exactly right. James leaned low over the star, squinting at it, concentrating. The star almost seemed to pulse, and a dull ringing came with it, blocking out the other faint noises in the room.

Petra isn't one of the other two points, he now realized, and the sinking sensation in his stomach grew worse, chilling him. *Petra isn't one of them. She's both of them. Petra... and Morgan.*

He frowned to himself. That didn't make any sense at all, did it? Petra and Morgan were the same person, like two parts of the same mind, like the Jekyll and Hyde character in Mr. Walker's book. The Morgan side was the part that was influenced by the cursed shred of soul that once belonged to Lord Voldemort. The other part was the Petra that they had always known: smart, honest, inquisitive, and quirky. The good Petra had subdued the Morgan part of her personality—once in the Chamber of Secrets, and again at Morganstern Farm, when she had almost (but not quite) sacrificed her own sister to the lake.

But what about Petra's mysterious dreams? What did it mean that Petra had been plagued by visions of her sister dying in that very lake? Was the Morgan side of Petra's mind growing more powerful? Was the balance of power tipping? *I watch and I wait*, the voice of Morgan had said, echoing from the dark tower in Petra's new dream of the strange, ocean-locked plateau. *My time is very near. I am the Sorceress Queen. I am the Princess of Chaos...*

James looked at the last octocard again, the Star; four points merging toward the center, like paths meeting, forging a new destiny. *The four of us are converging somehow*, he thought, and even though it seemed vaguely mad, he knew that it was true. *Petra and Morgan, the mysterious lady, and me—all leading to something. But is it something good or bad? Is it something that should be stopped? Is it a destiny? Or a choice?*

James didn't know the answer to the first part of that question, but the second part was all too clear. Destiny, as Professor Jackson had once said, is merely the name we give to the sum total of all of our life's choices. Was James making the right choices? Were the octocards offering him confirmation of his recent decisions... or a warning?

"James," a voice said, startling him. He glanced up and saw Professor Thackery standing in front of him, his hand out. "The examination period is over, James. Your test, please."

James was shocked. How had the last twenty minutes gone by so quickly? He looked around and saw that the rest of the classroom was empty. Everyone else had finished and headed off to lunch.

"Uh, sure, Professor," James stammered, glancing guiltily down at his parchment. To his continued surprised, he saw that the last page was covered with his own handwriting. He had no recollection of writing anything at all. With no chance to read his own prediction, he handed the parchment to the professor.

“Very good,” Thackery said, peering through his glasses at the parchment. “Very, er, thorough.”

James nodded uncertainly. “Thanks, Professor.”

Feeling shaky and a little spooked, he virtually fled the classroom, following his friends to lunch.

Here endeth chapter fifteen. What did you think?

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