



17. THE BALLAD OF THE RIDER

Where the holiday break seemed to come and go like a flash of lightning, the spring semester unrolled before James like an interminable carpet with no end in sight. Albus, in particular, seemed to return to school with a rather bitter disposition.

“I thought we were going to be quit of this dump by now,” he grumped as they stalked across the campus toward their morning’s classes. A frigid wind scoured the mall beneath low, hulking clouds, making the boys’ cloaks flap like sails.

“Hey,” Zane said, his own typically cheerful disposition dampened by the arctic weather, “that’s the Aleron you’re talking about. I get why you might hate all your Wolfy pals back at Ares Mansion, but that’s just them. Hate the player, don’t hate the game.”

“I’ll hate whatever I bloody well want,” Albus muttered darkly.

“I’m surprised,” Ralph commented. “I thought you’d be fitting in just fine with the Werewolves. They don’t seem that far removed from our mates back in Slytherin.”

Albus scoffed humorlessly. “Hah. I’ll take Tabitha Corsica over Olivia Jones any day. Tabitha may have turned out to be a little off her broom in the end, but at least *she* hated people on *principle*. These gits just hate anyone whose great-great-great-great grandparents didn’t have the good fortune to have been on some stupid boat that landed at Plymouth bloody Rock.”

James was surprised at his brother’s sudden openness. He knew it would probably evaporate once he’d had a chance to settle into the routine of school again, but for now he took advantage of it.

“You mean,” he said as evenly as possible, “that they give you a hard time just because you aren’t an American?”

Albus pressed his lips together tightly and shook his head. “They’re fine with the fact that I’m not an American, so long as I don’t want to play Clutch or take part in the Morning Calisthenics Preparedness Corps or join their precious Salem-Dirgus Free Militia. Not that I *want* to do any of those things, mind you, but still, it gets a little old being constantly reminded that I’m shut out, whether I want in or not.”

“What’s old Stonewall say about it?” Zane asked, hefting his backpack against the icy wind.

“Oh, he talks a big game about how Werewolf House, like America in general, is the great melting pot, ‘welcoming all into the arms of liberty, vigilance, and civil service’, but the students are another cauldron of newts entirely. I suppose if I pressed the issue with Jackson, he’d make sure I got into whatever club or team I wanted, but then I’d just have to live with the Werewolves who’d tried to freeze me out to begin with. It’s easier just to lay low and wait to get back home to Slytherin.”

“Blimey,” Ralph commented. “After your performance on the clock tower during the flag switch escapade, I’d have thought you’d be the Werewolves’ golden boy.”

“Yeah,” Albus agreed sourly. “That impressed them all right. They said I showed a lot of promise ‘for a Cornelius’.”

“Hmm,” James nodded, reticent to say anything more. Some small, petty part of him was meanly glad that Albus was having difficulties with his house. *Serves him right for always siding with whatever group seems the most dodgy and evil*, he thought. *First the Slytherins, and now these daft, nationalistic Werewolf stump-heads*. Still, seeing how unhappy Albus apparently was, James’ spite was short-lived.

“Maybe you can come hang out with us at Apollo Mansion,” he offered. “We have a pretty decent game room and Yeats makes a mean pizza, if you can talk him into it.”

“Yeah, that’s just what I want,” Albus replied, rolling his eyes. “To start hanging out with the campus losers’ club. Thanks but no thanks. Werewolf House may be a bunch of narrow-minded grunts, but they excel at house pride. And at least there I can look forward to a Clutchcudgel trophy this year. You guys will be lucky if you get a single win.”

“He’s got you there, James,” Zane agreed unhelpfully. James was too cold to argue the issue and the boys trudged the rest of the way to class in silence.

Within the first week of school, James realized that he had entirely forgotten to ask Lucy about taking him, Ralph, and Zane on a tour of Erebus Castle so that they could try to solve the riddle of Magnussen’s dimensional key.

Zane rolled his eyes as the three boys huddled around a table in the library near the top of the Tower of Art. “It’s easy,” he whispered. “You just ask Lucy to be your date to the Valentine’s dance. Then, she’ll *have* to say yes when you tack on that you want her to show us around the Vampires’ castle.”

James shook his head. “It’s Lucy,” he said. “I don’t need to *trick* her or anything. I’ll just ask her. Of course she’ll say yes.”

Zane shrugged and leaned back in his chair. “Have it your way. Me, I’d want a little insurance. I hear she was pretty put off by all the touchy-feely that went down between you and Petra over Christmas.”

James’ face heated with mingled embarrassment and surprise. “What? That’s ridiculous! Nothing happened at all!”

Ralph grimaced uncomfortably. “I saw the two of you holding hands in the parlor,” he admitted. “So did Lucy. She pretended not to be bothered by it, but she hid in her room for awhile afterwards.”

“It wasn’t like *that*,” James sighed. “We were just talking. In fact, we were talking about how we’re going to try to clear her name.”

“Seems to me you should have been talking to Lucy about that,” Zane chided. “*She’s* the one whose go-ahead we need to get into Erebus Castle.”

“Look, Lucy isn’t Cheshire Chatterly and I’m not you,” James said, throwing a look at Zane. “I can’t trick her like that.”

“There weren’t any tricks involved with me and Cheshire,” Zane replied a bit defensively. “I got us the key to the Archive and Cheshire got to dance with me at the Halloween Ball. It was a win-win for everyone.”

James crossed his arms on the library table and rested his chin on them. “It’s different for you. Cheshire wasn’t... *sweet* on you to begin with.”

Zane frowned thoughtfully. “She was afterwards,” he replied with a shrug.

“Maybe Ralph can do it,” James offered, sitting up again. “How could anyone say no to that face?”

Ralph glanced from Zane to James, his brow knitted.

Zane shook his head. “It’s your ballgame, James. Unless you know any real-life vampires, Lucy’s our only in. Do it however you want, but you’d better do it quick-like. That Keynes guy won’t take forever to make his judgment about Petra.”

James knew that Zane was right. He also knew that they were probably making a much bigger deal out of the task than it deserved. Lucy was his cousin, after all. Still, her apparent infatuation with him tended to complicate matters in ways he couldn’t predict. To be safe, he determined he would ask her after the next Clutchcudgel match. Team Bigfoot was scheduled to face off against Vampire House again and the odds were that despite James’ best efforts, the Vamps would win handily. This would put Lucy in a good mood, rendering her more receptive to James’ request. Having decided this, James dismissed the matter for the time being.

Friday evening rolled around and James made his way to Pepperpock Down. There, he suited up in his Clutchcudgel gear alongside Jazmine, Gobbins, Wentworth, and the rest of Team Bigfoot.

“Nice new gauntlets,” Jazmine said appreciatively. “Christmas present?”

James nodded proudly. “Yeah, from my dad.”

“All I got was a bunch of hair potions and a box set of Remora’s awful novels,” Jazmine said, frowning. “My mother is just crazy about them. She was hoping that I’d end up in Vampire House, or even Pixie. She says Bigfoot isn’t very ‘Veela-like’.”

James didn’t know how to respond to that. “One of my aunts is part-Veela,” he ventured. “For what it’s worth, I prefer you to her most days.”

Jazmine smiled at him as she strapped on her shin pads.

“Let’s go, team,” Wood called from partway up the gantry stairs. “I hope you all wore your long underwear. It’s right frigid up there tonight.”

James grabbed his skrim and followed the team as they tramped up the steps into the windy evening. The sky over the gantries was cloudless, darkening toward sunset with a dusting of stars just beginning to twinkle high above. All around, the parapet grandstands were filled with cheering and jeering students, most waving the red and black banners of Vampire House.

“We’re the goats for tonight’s match,” Wood called over the noise, hunkering in the center of the huddled players. “If the Vampires win tonight, it knocks us clean out of the playoffs and seals their standings. Most of the people here tonight want to see a Werewolf-Vampire championship match, so sentiment is stacked pretty heavily against us. You’ve played excellently this year, team, even though there’s been a lot more offensive magic than I am, frankly, comfortable with. No matter what, we can walk away from tonight’s match with our heads held high. As always, let’s keep it clean out there and do our ruddy best. All right?”

The team rumbled their agreement and piled their hands atop Wood’s outstretched fist for the traditional rallying cry. “*GoOO FEET!*” they shouted in unison, and then broke apart, lining up along the edge of the platform.

“I don’t know about you,” Norrick muttered to James, “but I don’t plan to let the Vampires have this one without a fight.”

James nodded. “You been practicing up on that Solarflack bit that Wentworth came up with?”

“Spent half my Christmas break on it,” Norrick replied with a grim smile. “In this darkness, it’ll blind anybody who tries to ambush me from the rear and maybe force one or two of them to drop the Clutch if they try to pass me.”

“Nice,” James agreed. “At least we’ve already gotten one tie game under our belts this year, eh? If it hadn’t been for that, I bet half of these people would have stayed home tonight. Now they know that we’ll be making those Vampires work for it.”

In the air between the gantries, Professor Sanuye drifted like a dandelion seed on his official's broomstick. He blew a sharp blast on his whistle and James saw Jazmine kick off the platform, angling toward the center ring. The rest of the team followed, falling into position.

"Here goes nothing," Norrick grinned. "Into the breach!"

A moment later, both boys launched from the platform, leaning into the cold wind and squatting low over their skrim.

Sixty seconds later, after a single tense warm-up lap, Sanuye blew a long note on his whistle. James lunged forward on his skrim, launching it into a rocket-like acceleration, and immediately passed two Vampires. He darted through the center ring and, before he knew it, had captured one of the Clutches. He tucked it under his left arm and produced his wand from its sheath.

"Potter!" Gobbins called from behind him. "Two Bullies at twelve o'clock, dropping fast!"

James ducked on his skrim and pulled back, decelerating so quickly that the Clutch tried to squirt from beneath his arm. Almost instantly, two Vampire players dropped out of the darkness ahead of him, colliding with one another and bouncing out of the course. James leapt upwards, pulling his skrim with him, and somersaulted over the Bullies, barely passing through the nearest ring.

Artis Decerto, he thought to himself with a grin. *Who'd have thought it'd come in handy on the Clutch course? I'll have to start teaching that to the team as well.*

Still accelerating, James dodged through the course, completing his requisite laps before lobbing the Clutch through the goal ring. As soon as he released the Clutch, however, he jabbed his wand at it.

"*Diplicitous!*" he cried, and there was a flash of purple. Out of the flash, *three* Clutches seemed to spin toward the goal instead of one. The Vampire Keeper hesitated for only a moment, and then swatted her Cudgel at the middle of the three balls. The Cudgel passed right through the phantom Clutch, however, allowing the real Clutch to flash through the goal ring behind her. A roar erupted from the crowd as James flew on, his hair whipping in the cold wind, and he couldn't tell if the spectators were cheering or booing, nor did he care.

By halftime, James was stunned to realize that the Vampires were leading Team Bigfoot by only four points. The Bigfoots were greatly heartened by this fact and entered the second half of the match with a steadfast determination to at least end the game in a tie. It would still result in a technical victory for Vampire House, but at least the Bigfoots could go home feeling that they had achieved a symbolic victory, if nothing else.

It was very hard to keep track of the actual score while the match was in progress since there were, at any given time, three Clutches in play. James glanced up at the scoreboard occasionally and saw that by the fourth quarter, the Bigfoots had, in fact, matched the Vampires almost exactly throughout the second half of the game. The score hovered at forty-six to forty-five, with Team Vampire clinging to a very fragile lead.

“Jazmine has a Clutch!” Norrick called, swooping alongside James. “You make sure she gets to the goal! The rest of us will drop on their Clippers like a ton of bricks, all right?”

“Got it!” James called with a curt nod. He glanced aside and saw Jazmine ducking through the course behind him, her cape flashing orange in the stadium lights. James dropped to one knee on his skim, grabbing the nose with both hands as the board ground to a halt beneath him. Jazmine circled around and saw him waiting. She nodded her understanding.

“Time to mow the lawn,” James announced, launching to full speed again and moving directly in front of Jazmine. He produced his wand and trained it on the Vampire Bullies ahead. A quick gravity well sucked them both out of the rings, allowing James and Jazmine to soar past without so much as a dip in their course. The rings flashed by and James aimed again, using a Lanyard Charm to twitch the end of another Vampire’s skim, causing him to lose control and veer out of the rings. James glanced up in time to see that Norrick had succeeded in forcing one of the Vampire Clippers out of the course using his Solarflack Hex. Bursts of stunning light still sparkled in his wake as he pumped his fist triumphantly in the air.

“We’re nearly there, Jazmine!” James called back. “Nail the shot and we might just knot this match!”

James circled around the last length of the figure eight course and prepared to drop out of the way, giving Jazmine room to aim. As he dipped, however, a shadow flickered over the end of his skim. Glancing up, he saw that the second Vampire Clipper had caught up to Jazmine. The Clipper raised his own Clutch overhead, preparing to shoot for the goal at exactly the same time as Jazmine. Without thinking, James raised his wand once more, calling out his spell at exactly the same moment that both Clippers released their Clutches.

What happened next happened nearly too fast to watch, and yet, in James’ mind, it seemed to take hours. He saw Jazmine’s Clutch arc through the air, tracking alongside the Vampire Clipper’s shot, but Jazmine’s aim was too low; her Clutch was going to miss the goal entirely. James’ Lanyard Charm, however, neatly caught the Vampire’s Clutch. With a flick of his wand, James twitched the opponent’s Clutch downwards, forcing it to dip and then bob up again. The Vampire’s Clutch collided in midair with Jazmine’s, altering its course. A split second later, both Clutches soared through the goal ring, past the two Keepers, who had moved aside in an effort not to accidentally block their own team’s shot.

James rocketed beneath the goal ring into sudden silence. He glanced back, saw Jazmine’s look of stunned disbelief, and then startled as the grandstands exploded into wild, deafening cheers all around.

“We scored a knockpoint!” Jazmine cried in amazement, catching up to James and smacking him on the shoulder. “A knockpoint, James! I can’t even remember the last time that happened!”

“What’s a knockpoint?” James called over the noise of the crowd. The rest of the team was catching up to them now, forming a midair dog-pile all around him.

“You knocked our Clutch against theirs and put them both through the goal!” Jazmine yelled, laughing. “That makes *both* points ours! We get double the score, James!”

“You mean,” James said, buffeting as the team collapsed around him and Jazmine, “we won?”

“We won!” Norrick hollered, laughing. “Holy hinkypunks! We won!”

The rest of the team joined in the shout, proclaiming their victory and pushing James and Jazmine upwards between them. As one wild, bobbing bunch, the team drifted toward their platform and broke apart on top of it, roaring with triumphant delight.

“*And* in a shocking, record-breaking upset,” Cheshire Chatterly’s voice cried, echoing from the announcer’s booth, “Team Bigfoot snatches their first victory in nearly twelve years with an amazing game-winning knockpoint goal by the combined efforts of team captain Jazmine Jade and newcomer James Sirius Potter! With that, Team Vampire’s playoffs hopes are put on hold for at least one more match while Team Bigfoot refuses to be bumped out for the season. What a match, folks! What... a... match!”

Out of the darkness of the platform, a figure nearly bowled James over, calling his name. “James! You big genius, you! A knockpoint win! How’d you do that!?”

“Zane!” James laughed, struggling to stay upright. “I don’t know! I didn’t even know what a knockpoint was until it happened! How’d you get up here?”

“Me and Ralph came up ten minutes ago when we thought you were just going to tie the match,” Zane replied excitedly.

“Wood said we could watch the rest of the match from up here,” Ralph added, grinning. “What a party, eh?”

“First victory in over a decade,” Gobbins announced, clapping James heartily on the shoulder pads. “Thanks to our new magic coach, James Potter! Come on, everyone! Victory party at the Kite and Key in twenty minutes! Let’s see if we still remember how to do it, eh?”

With raucous whoops of delight and a great tramping of feet, Team Bigfoot clambered down the steps to the locker cellar, singing the Bigfoot House anthem and virtually carrying James and Jazmine on their shoulders.

It wasn’t until an hour and a half later that James remembered his intention of asking Lucy about getting a tour of Erebus Castle. He was just leaving the Kite and Key when he spotted her at a table populated by a gaggle of morose-looking Vampire students. He didn’t think anything of it—after all, Vampire students made quite a show of being morose at nearly every moment—until she got up and met him near the door.

“Congratulations, cousin,” she said a little stiffly. “You wanted to talk to me about something?”

“Yeah,” James nodded, remembering that he had asked her to find him after the match. “Er, are you heading back to the castle now? We could walk together.”

Lucy studied him for a moment, and then nodded somberly. James pushed open the back door of the Kite and Key, letting in a gust of wintry air and sand-like snow crystals.

“Er,” he said as the two of them walked into the darkness of the campus, “this is a little awkward. I hadn’t exactly expected to win tonight, you know.”

“You did very well,” Lucy said coolly. “A knockpoint. The Vampires say that that hasn’t happened in forever. They say you just got lucky, but I stuck up for you. I told them you’re very talented in a lot of ways.”

James was glad that they were walking in the darkness. He felt extremely awkward all of a sudden.

“Thanks, Lu,” he said. “I wanted to ask you a favor, like.”

Lucy stopped walking and peered up at him, her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What?”

“I—” James began, and then swallowed hard. “Er, I was just thinking. Ralph and Zane and me, we’re really interested in checking out Erebus Castle. We’ve heard some stuff about it and we thought it’d be neat to give it a once over, you know? But according to the house rules, we can’t get in unless we’re accompanied by a Vampire student or a real-life vampire. So, you being in Vampire House and all…”

“Why are you so interested in Erebus Castle all of a sudden?” Lucy asked, her eyes still narrowed in the darkness, watching James critically.

“It’s nothing, really. I mean…” He stopped, gulped again, and then decided, on the spur of the moment, to change his tactic. “I thought you’d like to go to the Valentine’s dance with me?”

Lucy’s face looked pained for a very brief moment, but she quickly hid it. “This has something to do with Petra Morganstern, doesn’t it?”

James blinked, stunned. “What…?” he stammered. “I mean, how…? No, of course not, don’t be silly.”

“I saw you two talking over Christmas, James,” Lucy said, looking away. “I don’t know what it is you’re planning or what it has to do with the castle, but you could at least have paid me the compliment of being honest.” She shook her head slightly, and when she looked up at him again, there were tears standing in her eyes. “Really, James? The Valentine’s dance? Like I’d want to go with you to that anyway.”

She glanced away again, swiping a hand angrily across her face.

“Look, Lu,” James said, taking a step closer. “Sorry. It was Zane’s idea. I’ll tell you the truth if you really want to know. It isn’t what you think it is. Really.”

“I don’t think anything at all, you big git,” Lucy said, her voice thick. “And I don’t want to know, either way. Whatever it is you’re looking for in Erebus Castle, you can find someone else to be your ticket in.”

She turned and stalked away before James could respond. After a dozen steps, she turned back again, barely a shadowy shape in the darkness.

“And just so you know,” she called, “there are *loads* of people who want to take me to the Valentine’s dance. What, do you think I’ve just been waiting for *you* to come along and ask? You’re my cousin, James. Don’t be such a creep.”

Having delivered her final salvo, she spun on her heel again and nearly ran into the trees, making black scrapes on the snow-cruled footpath.

James watched her go, feeling utterly foolish and miserably angry at himself. He considered chasing after her, but some deep wise inner voice told him that that would only make matters worse.

With a disconsolate sigh, James turned around himself. Much more slowly, he trudged into the darkness, heading for the distant, blocky shape of Apollo Mansion.



Over the course of the following week, a sudden warm snap descended over the campus, melting the ice and snow from the footpaths and reducing the campus’ freight of icicles to steadily dripping crystal nubs. James, Ralph, and Zane spent most of their free time trying to think of another way into Erebus Castle, but encountered no success whatsoever. Their final effort had been to sneak away after Thursday afternoon’s Cursology class, which was held in the castle’s smoked-glass moonroom. This had failed almost immediately, however, when a small portrait of a very stern wizard with a pointed goatee had cornered them on the landing of the main staircase.

“*Halt* right there, gentlemen,” the portrait pronounced as they crept past. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Shh,” Zane hissed, turning back. “We’re just looking around a bit. Don’t get your widow’s peak out of joint.”

The portrait smiled a little disconcertingly. “Only residents of Erebus Castle are allowed upstairs, my friends,” it said in a suddenly silky voice. “But what can I do about it? Me, a mere painting. Do as you wish, but consider yourselves warned.”

“That’s more like it,” Zane muttered, turning back toward the stairs. The boys made it halfway up to the second landing when the risers suddenly shuddered beneath their feet. With a loud *thunk*, the step immediately above James’ feet retracted sideways into the wall, leaving a gaping black hole in its place. The next step down followed, nearly pitching James forward into the darkness beneath the steps. He scrambled backwards, bumping into Zane and Ralph, and the stairs

began to retract more quickly, chasing them back the way they had come. The three boys clambered wildly back down the stairs, falling over each other, until they reached the main landing once again and crashed, panting, to the wooden floor.

“What was that all about?” Zane exclaimed angrily, struggling to his feet.

“You were warned,” the portrait sniffed mildly.

“Warned nothing!” James said. “You might’ve told us that we were about to get tossed to our dooms!”

The portrait clucked its tongue indignantly. “The fall wouldn’t have killed you,” it said. “The rats might’ve though. They’ve become rather an advanced vicious little tribe down there, after living for so many years in a magical castle.”

James peered into the darkness beneath the stairs. He fancied he could hear faint scratchings and even the clicking of little teeth.

“Wow,” Ralph shuddered. “That is *so* not right.”

With a loud *kachunk*, the stairsteps suddenly socked back into place, covering the hole.

“Perhaps next time you three will consider abiding by the rules,” the portrait commented sternly. “*And* respecting your elders, painted or otherwise. Now be gone with you before I alert the House President.”

That got the boys moving since the last thing they wanted was any entanglements with Professor Remora.

“I can’t believe we don’t know anyone else in Vampire House,” Zane groaned as they made their way toward the cafeteria for lunch. “I mean, let’s face it: I’m a loveable guy. *Everybody* gets along with me.”

“Maybe we should just try to follow Magnussen into the past without knowing what the dimensional key is,” James offered consideringly. “Perhaps if we just hang back and watch him, we’ll be able to figure it out, right?”

“Maybe,” Ralph said, shrugging. “But I’d sure hate to get that bit wrong. We only get one chance. Rose says that time travel is really tetchy that way.”

“What do you mean,” Zane asked as they pulled open the doors to Administration Hall, following a gaggle of older students toward the cafeteria. “I don’t think I was there for that conversation. Not that I don’t love Rose’s hectoring predictions about all the ways we might destroy the fabric of the universe and all.”

James sighed. “She says it’s the reason why Time-Turners have been outlawed. Technomancy guys like Jackson have discovered that it’s super dangerous for one person to occupy the same timeframe more than once. Something about identical matter accidentally coming together and causing ‘catastrophic pluralities’ or something quantum like that. Bottom line is that if we don’t capture Magnussen’s dimensional key the first time out, we won’t have another chance without potentially causing way more trouble than we hope to prevent.”

“So how sure are you that we really *have* to do this anyway?” Ralph asked, getting in line and grabbing a tray. “You still think the real bad guys are hiding out in the World Between the Worlds?”

“No doubt in my mind,” James replied, with a little more conviction than he actually felt. “That missing crimson thread is far too powerful to just disappear without a trace. If it was in our world, somebody somewhere would have sensed its trail. The only place it could possibly be hidden is outside of our dimension. It just makes sense.”

“Well then, I guess we’re back to square one,” Zane said, grabbing two bowls of green pudding and cramming them onto his already filled tray. “To get into the World Between the Worlds, we need to get Magnussen’s dimensional key, which means we need to somehow get into Erebus Castle so we can figure out the riddle of what the key actually *is*.” He sighed briskly. “Maybe we should just hex Ralph’s teeth into points and try to pass him off as Count Ralphula the Impaler. What do you say, Ralphinator? Worth a shot?”

“Don’t even start,” Ralph said, shaking his head.

The boys found a place at one of the long tables, cramming in across from Wentworth, who was distracted by a series of fussy sneezes.

“What’s with you, Went?” James asked, poking at his stew with a fork.

“Garlic,” Wentworth replied, wiping his nose. “It’s my special diet. I’m not even eating the stuff, but I can still smell it in everyone else’s lunch. Breaks me all out.”

Zane stirred his own bowl. “Yeah, this stuff’s pretty heavy with it. Too bad for you, Went. It’s yum in the tum.”

Wentworth sniffled. “Yeah, well, you all could show a little more sensitivity. I can’t help being this way, you know. It’s in my genes, all the way back to what my parents call ‘the old country’.” He rolled his eyes and shook his head. James watched as the smaller boy reached for a large stoneware mug. Wentworth pinched his nose and drank from it carefully.

“Just out of curiosity,” Zane suddenly said, frowning at Wentworth, “where, exactly, *is* ‘the old country?’”

Wentworth peered over his mug at Zane a little warily. “Somewhere in Europe,” he answered. “A little region in Romania, if you must know.”

“Really,” Zane said, still frowning. “Does it start with a ‘T’, maybe?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about it,” Wentworth announced, lowering his mug but holding it near his chest. “My mother says we’re not like that anymore. She says the less we talk about it, the better.”

“What’re you drinking there, Went?” James asked, peering over the table.

“It’s nothing,” Went said. “It’s for my special diet. It’s not like I *want* to drink it, you know. Ten ounces a day is all.”

“Is that tomato juice?” Ralph said, using his height to peek into Wentworth’s mug. “Looks... too dark, somehow.”

“It’s juice!” Wentworth proclaimed, covering the cup with his hand. “Er, kind of. That’s all you need to know! What?”

Zane glanced from Ralph to James. “Wentworth, do me a little favor,” he said smoothly, realization dawning on his suddenly crafty face. “Give ’ums one of those big ‘old world’ smiles, eh?”

“Yeah, Went,” James added curiously. “Let’s see those teeth.”



“Coming through!” Zane called out, pushing Wentworth through the front door of Erebus Mansion like a boy-sized battering ram. “Vampire here! You have to let us in!”

“Stop,” Wentworth insisted, blushing furiously. “Nobody is supposed to know!”

“It’s all right,” James soothed, following close behind. “You’re among your fellow ‘creatures of the night’ here.”

“What’s going on?” a tall boy demanded in an imperious voice, moving to block the four intruders in the foyer. “You can’t just barge in here. This is for Vampire House members and their guests only.”

“*And* real-life vampires,” Zane added, patting Wentworth on the top of his head. “Says so in your house charter. ‘Any roaming vampires seeking asylum or succor are welcome within these halls.’ I looked it up to be sure. I thought the word ‘succor’ was a nice play on words. That’s got Remora written all over it, doesn’t it?”

“This kid’s no vampire,” the boy sneered, looking down his nose at Wentworth. “Get out of here before I call the professor.”

“Go ahead and call her,” James nodded. “Went here has the teeth *and* the pedigree. He’s the real deal, right down to his ten ounce blood ration a day and an unnatural allergy to garlic and garlic-related root veg. Tell him, Went.”

“I’m really sorry,” Wentworth said, his cheeks burning. “I had nothing to do with this. No one’s supposed to know, really. My parents made special arrangements with the school...”

“Oh, let them in, Harding,” a girl said from a nearby sofa. “Who cares? Remora isn’t even here.”

“This kid’s no vampire, no matter what these cretins say,” the boy, Harding, declared, narrowing his eyes, his nostrils flaring. “No vampire, *no* entry.”

“But look at his teeth,” Ralph insisted, guiding Went under the nearest chandelier. “They may not be the sorts of fangs you read about in Professor Remora’s books, but they’re plenty pointy if you look at them in the right light. Show them, Went. See?”

“Anyone can hex a pair of fangs,” Harding replied, rolling his eyes.

“Let me take a look at the boy,” another voice said, its tone polite but commanding. James glanced around. The portrait of the stern-faced man with the pointed beard was staring down at them from the lower landing. Harding looked from the portrait to Wentworth, considering. Finally, reluctantly, the taller boy nodded toward the landing.

“Make it quick and then vanish, why don’t you?” he growled.

James, Zane, and Ralph followed Wentworth closely, crowding up onto the landing. The portrait narrowed its eyes at the small boy. James glanced at the little brass plaque affixed to the bottom of the portrait’s round frame. It read, ‘*Niles Covington Erebus III*.’

“Only moderately developed in the canines,” the portrait said thoughtfully. “But real enough, I suspect. Hmm. There’s only one way to know for certain. Mr. Harding, if you would turn me around, please.”

Obediently, the sneering boy climbed onto the landing and sidled toward the painting. Eyes still narrowed at Wentworth, he lifted the painting of Niles Erebus from the wall. When he turned it around, James was surprised to see that the rear of the painting was a mirror.

“Look at yourself, young man,” Erebus said, apparently speaking to Wentworth.

Comically, everyone on the landing leaned toward the mirror.

“HO-lee HINKYpunks!” Zane breathed in amazement. “Went! Where are you?”

Still peering into the mirror, James reached aside with his right hand. His fingers patted Wentworth on the face, knocking the boy’s glasses askew. In the mirror, however, James’ fingers moved over empty space.

“Hey,” Wentworth said, annoyed, straightening his glasses. “Quit it, already.”

“He’s not there!” Ralph exclaimed. “He’s invisible in the mirror!”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Wentworth announced wearily. “It’s not like some kind of superpower or anything. You have any idea how hard it is to comb your hair if you can’t see yourself in a mirror?”

“Well, Mr. Harding,” the portrait of Erebus said from the reverse side of the Mirror, “it would appear that this young man is, indeed, the real article. According to the house rules, he and his guests must be granted entrance.”

“But,” Harding said, disgusted, “*look* at him! *That’s* not what a vampire is supposed to look like!”

“And you are an expert on these things, of course,” Erebus sighed. “Fear not. I will accompany our guests during their visit and assure that they do not wander where they are unwelcome. After all, being granted entrance does not amount to *carte blanche* access to anywhere they wish, does it?”

“It sure doesn’t,” Harding nodded dourly. He sneered at Zane again and then, rather stiffly, handed him the small portrait. “Enjoy your stay, *gentlemen*.”

“Thanks, Harding,” Zane grinned, taking the portrait. “Your vigilance is inspiring. I’ll put in a good word for you with all the other vampires I know.” He winked at the older boy.

“Well then, my friends,” Erebus said briskly as Harding skulked back down to the parlor, “now that you have attained something approaching a *legitimate* entrance, I believe you were on your way to the upper corridor. Shall we proceed together this time with better luck?”

Over the course of the next hour, James, Ralph, Wentworth, and Zane wandered the myriad halls, landings, secret stairways, hidden chambers, dens, bathrooms, and various common spaces of the castle, all the while listening to an informative, if slightly pedantic monologue from Erebus’ portrait about the details of each space. Apart from being somewhat amazed at the sheer number of rooms crammed into the castle, the boys found nothing that illuminated the riddle of Ignatius Magnussen’s dimensional key.

“I don’t get it,” Zane finally proclaimed, plopping onto a chair on the third-floor landing. “How’d the quote go? ‘The truth walked the halls of Erebus Castle,’ right? Well, we’ve walked more halls than I can count and I didn’t encounter any truth. Did you?”

James shook his head. “I didn’t realize it would be this hard. I thought once we got inside, it’d just make sense, somehow.”

“Might I inquire,” the portrait of Niles Erebus said with a somewhat impatient sniff, “what you gentlemen are talking about?”

“You got me,” Wentworth announced, shaking his head and rolling his eyes. “I’m just the token vampire. I decided these three were totally nuts three floors ago.”

“It’s this riddle we heard,” Ralph admitted, leaning the portrait on a windowsill so he could look at it. “Some old professor from a long time ago said it: the truth walked the halls of Erebus Castle. You seem to know an awful lot about this place. Any ideas what it might mean?”

“I *built* this castle,” Erebus said, bristling. “I should think I would know everything that could possibly be known about it. Your riddle, however, is rather hopelessly obtuse. Without any sort of context, it could mean anything at all.”

James sighed. “What a complete waste of time. It was probably just something Magnussen made up after all, just to throw everyone off his trail.”

“Magnussen, you say?” the portrait asked, raising one eyebrow. “Ignatius Magnussen?”

“Yeah,” Ralph replied, perking up a little. “You know anything about him?”

“Virtually nothing,” Erebus answered dismissively. “He was rather after my time as you’ve apparently failed to notice. In my current state, however, I do recall seeing him visit the castle from time to time. The man had a bit of a fascination, it seemed.”

“How’d he get in?” James asked. “He wasn’t a vampire too, was he?”

Erebus rolled his eyes impatiently. “*Obviously* the rules of entrance do not apply to faculty and administration, young man. Every house is regularly frequented by professors from different societies, both for social and academic reasons.”

“So where did Magnussen go when *he* was here?” Zane asked impatiently.

“I did not have to chaperone *him* during his visits,” Erebus answered disdainfully. “But I do recall that he took copious notes about some of the tapestries.”

Zane looked hard at James, his eyebrows raised. “Tapestries,” he repeated. “Can we, maybe, see these tapestries?”

Erebus sighed dramatically. “Second floor,” he drawled. “North corridor. And do try not to carry my frame like that, young man. There might be less pleasant views in the world than your armpit, but I am hard-pressed to think of any at the moment.”

“Sorry,” Ralph muttered, taking the frame from beneath his arm.

When they finally arrived at the second-floor corridor, James was surprised to find that they had somehow missed this area during their earlier tour. The corridor was quite high, lined with windows on one side and very old floor-length tapestries on the other. The windows were covered with thick golden curtains, pulled tightly closed.

“It’s so dark,” Ralph said, creeping slowly into the hall. “I can barely see in here.”

“*Luminos*,” the portrait of Erebus said in a low voice. In response, a series of crystal chandeliers began to glow, flames growing silently from their previously unlit candles.

“The tapestries are quite ancient,” Erebus explained as the boys walked along the corridor, watching as the candlelight flickered over the woven images. “Erebus family treasures, in fact, passed

down through many generations. Sunlight has faded them over the centuries, thus they are now kept secluded in darkness, preserved as well as they can be.”

James took a step closer to the first of the huge tapestries. The threadwork was very fine, reminding him of the neat weaving of the Loom of Destinies. Unlike the Loom, however, the images shown here were not abstract. Each illustration was skillfully rendered, even lifelike. James almost expected them to begin moving.

“It looks like they tell a story,” Wentworth commented, his voice unconsciously hushed.

“An astute observation, my friend,” Erebus replied. “These are, in fact, a complete series, telling an ancient tale known as the Ballad of the Rider.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Zane commented.

Erebus chuckled humorlessly. “Nor am I surprised. It is not the sort of tale the wizarding world tends to repeat. It is a tragedy, in fact, and a very dark one.”

James peered up at the nearest tapestry again. On it, a tall, grave man with a black beard sat upon a horse. On closer inspection, James realized that the horse was, in fact, a unicorn, dappled gray, with powerful forelegs and a mane of shimmering gold. Every line and thread of the image implied that the rider and the unicorn were regal, solemn, almost glorious. Behind them, a wildly colorful and ornate starburst stretched from one edge of the tapestry to the other. Along the bottom were dozens of hands and faces, all leering up toward the Rider, pointing, shouting, crying carefully woven blue tears of delight or terror.

“What’s happening in this one?” James asked, a little breathlessly.

“That,” Erebus intoned solemnly, “is the arrival of the Rider. According to the Ballad, his coming was marked by a blinding curtain of light, as if one of the very stars had descended from the night sky and settled, for one twinkling moment, on a hilltop. The Rider appeared from within the light, which vanished behind him. This was in the Dark Ages of Europe, and as you might imagine, his arrival caused great fear among those who witnessed it. The Rider explained himself, however, describing his home in a different reality, one similar to our own, but utterly peaceful and advanced in both the healing and magical arts. To prove his assertions, he described the process by which his world’s foremost witches and wizards had discovered the existence of other realities and learned how they were all bound together by one central core: the Nexus. Using their arts, they created a portal into the Nexus with hopes of reaching out to other dimensions. His purpose, he claimed, was to venture into less fortunate realities and share the wealth of their learning.”

“The Nexus,” Zane whispered, nodding. “This fits perfectly with everything we’ve heard about the Nexus Curtain and the World Between the Worlds.”

Together, the four boys drifted toward the next tapestry. This one showed the bearded Rider standing at the head of a table, surrounded by seated witches and wizards. The Rider’s posture implied that he was speaking, his arm raised in a gesture of conjuring. Over the table hovered a fanciful representation of a globe, covered with jungles, mountains, waterfalls, and placid oceans. The globe’s continents were dotted with magnificent cities, its oceans streaked by sailing vessels with

bright blue sails. The vision was contrived to seem as if it was spreading beams of light all around the room, but the listeners at the table seemed not to notice. Their faces were caricatures of wickedness: porcine and bloated, grinning and narrow-eyed, some with their heads bowed together in obvious conspiracy.

“Ohhh,” Ralph said, nodding with realization. “He’s describing his dimension to everybody.”

“Doesn’t much look like they’re listening though,” James added.

Erebus frowned inside his frame. “Indeed not. The Rider fell into the council of greedy witches and wizards, who were far less interested in the gifts of his enlightenment than they were the dark magic they believed could be gleaned from him and his unicorn. Until then, there had been no such beasts in our world, you see, and these crafty witches and wizards instinctively understood that this was a creature of fabulous power. Thus, they bided their time, pretending to listen, all the while plotting how to steal the man’s magic and use it against him. In truth, their intention, horribly, was to learn the use of the Rider’s portal and invade his reality, taking whatever they wished by force and domination.”

“Some welcoming committee,” Wentworth said sourly.

Zane asked, “So were they able to do it?”

“Fortunately for us, they were not,” Erebus replied. “Had their scheme succeeded, our own reality would surely have descended into horrors, taking many more with it, perhaps even to destruction. The balance of the Destinies prevailed, however, halting their evil plans, but not without cost.”

The group stood before the third tapestry now. On it, men in dark robes crowded around the unicorn, which was reared on its hind hooves, pawing at the air, its teeth bared in desperation. Around its neck and connected to the fists of its dark adversaries was a collection of restraining ropes. Worse, a crooked dagger was raised in the hand of one of the dark wizards, pointing toward the unicorn’s dappled flank. In the foreground, the Rider seemed to be in a duel with several of the dark wizards, his face noble yet resigned, as he was hopelessly outnumbered by his foes.

Erebus spoke, continuing his recitation of the Ballad. “Once the horrid plan was placed into action, the Rider was imprisoned. His unicorn was experimented upon and forced to breed with common horses, all in an attempt to create more of its kind. This, of course, is the origin of the few unicorns that still roam the deepest woods of our day, less powerful than their noble ancestor, but still glorious. In the end, the Rider succeeded in mustering his powers for an escape. Being peaceful, he attempted to spare his captors’ lives, but they viewed his mercy as weakness. In the end, they chased him and his unicorn down, subduing them both by sheer numbers. Unable to wrest the secret of the Nexus from him, they eventually killed him and hopelessly wounded his unicorn at the same time.”

James shook his head. “That’s perfectly beastly,” he said in a low voice.

“It gets worse,” Erebus admitted stoically.

The gathering moved to the last tapestry. It glowed in the candlelight, somehow both more vibrant and more ghastly than the others. The scene showed a moonlit forest, dominated by a huddle of the dark-robed witches and wizards. They seemed to be bent over something, obscuring it.

“What are they doing?” Ralph asked tentatively, frowning at the tall image. “What’s all that silvery stuff running all over the ground?”

“Alas,” Erebus replied darkly, “according to the Ballad, the evil witches and wizards realized that their plan had been foiled. They had murdered their only hope of conquering the other dimensions and mortally wounded the creature that might have granted them powers beyond their dreams. In a final, ghastly attempt to harness the magic of that hidden realm, they fell upon the wounded unicorn and consumed its blood, still warm from its failing heart. As they feasted upon it, piteously, the poor beast died.

“Unmoved by the extremity of their crimes and grown cruelly powerful by their draught of the unicorn’s blood, these witches and wizards turned into legends of horror for decades thereafter. They had become virtually unstoppable, you see, darkly magical and inhumanly strong. They were known to strike terror into the hearts of all they met since both their eyes and mouths glowed with a pale silvery light, forever tainted by the blood of their prey. To cover this, they fashioned masks of metal, even more terrible than their human faces, and wore them as signs of their fraternity. For nearly a century, these beasts in human form ruled with mayhem, torture, and murder, known universally by the name that they had chosen for themselves, a name that explained both the source of their powers and the depths of their depravity. ‘Death Eaters’, they called themselves; a word that became synonymous with dark ambition, inhumanity, and power at any cost.”

“*They* were the original Death Eaters?” James asked faintly, staring up at the horrible image. “But... Voldemort...?”

“The devil cannot create,” Erebus said evenly. “He can only pervert. The villain your age knew as Voldemort adopted the policies of these, his spiritual brethren. He took their name and claimed it for himself, but he did not invent it.”

Shuddering, Wentworth asked, “So, what ever became of those guys?”

“Over the decades, heroes of stout heart and courage hunted them down,” Erebus answered, nodding gravely in his frame. “Many knights died in the attempt, but one by one, the Death Eaters were dispatched, their heads cut from their shoulders and buried while their bodies were burned to dust. In the end, only one remained, a woman named Proserpine. She was finally cornered in her secret citadel, deep in a tractless forest. There, rather than facing her pursuers, she took her own life, leaving her own severed head smiling on the doorstep, its eyes still glowing with dead malevolence. Her body, the legends claim, was never found.”

Ralph shivered. “*Helloo*, nightmares,” he squeaked.

“What about the unicorn’s body?” Wentworth asked, shaking his head. “Didn’t they try to preserve that somehow?”

Erebus scoffed lightly. “The Death Eaters cared not for preserving the corpse of their victim. According to legend, however, explorers did eventually find the poor creature’s skeleton, complete with its magical horn. Rather than burying it or bringing it back, they decided to leave it as a memorial, hidden within a seamless blanket of unplottability, forever at rest. They did bring back one thing, though, as proof of their discovery: a single silver horseshoe, which they claimed was still attached to the beast’s right front hoof, gleaming and uncorrupted. For centuries, that very horseshoe was a symbol of humility and regret, kept safe by a council of knights whose sole job was to watch for the appearance of any more delegates from the dimension beyond. If such a delegate were ever to appear, the horseshoe was to be returned to them in homage, a humble, insufficient apology for the crime that had been committed against their people.”

“Wow,” Zane said softly, somber for once. “So are those knights still out there somewhere, guarding the horseshoe and watching for anyone from that other dimension?”

“Alas, no,” Erebus sighed. “My family was the last of those knights, and I was the last of my family, come to this new country in the hopes of finding a permanent hiding place for the relic. As a result, the horseshoe was granted to this college, an heirloom and a sacred trust. Unfortunately, by then, its significance had been all but lost. For many years, it was preserved in the museum atop the Tower of Art, well guarded but forgotten. Now, I suspect, none even remember that it was ever there.”

“Why?” James asked, blinking suddenly. “What happened to it? Where is it now?”

Erebus chuckled ruefully. “That, as they used to say in my time, is the thousand Drummel question. It seems that sometime after my own death, the horseshoe was borrowed from the museum and never returned. Obviously, I myself am less than clear on the details--we portraits have rather a difficult time absorbing much of what happens beyond our own deaths--but I believe that the horseshoe went into the library of a trusted private collector. I suppose I should care more about it, seeing as I was the last of a long line of those whose duty was to protect the relic. But as I said, death offers its own unique perspective, one facet of which is that it becomes exceedingly easy not to give a damn. I can only hope that the horseshoe has been well cared for. Or, at the very least, been tossed into a very, very deep well.”

James’ eyes had grown wide as he listened. Silently, he turned to look at Ralph, and then Zane. Both of them returned his look of speechless realization.

“What?” Wentworth said, frowning. “You three look like somebody just shot Freezing Charms into your underpants.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” James asked quietly.

Zane nodded. “I’m thinking I bet I know who the mysterious patron is that ‘borrowed’ the old lucky horseshoe.”

“But how would Magnussen have figured it all out?” Ralph asked. “*We’ve* got the portrait to explain everything, but Magnussen didn’t get anything from him, apparently.”

“Magnussen wouldn’t have *needed* anyone to explain it!” James whispered, flush with excitement. “Remember what Franklyn told us? Magnussen was a guy who loved stories! He’d probably already read all about the legend of the Rider!”

Zane nodded. “Then, later, when he’s out prowling the halls here in the castle, he spies these tapestries and starts putting everything together. He connects the tapestries with the silver horseshoe up in the Tower of Art and bammo, he’s got the dimensional key he’s been dreaming of all along!”

“Wow,” Ralph laughed a little nervously. “So the riddle was right after all. The truth walked the halls of Erebus Castle, right here. The truth was *Magnussen* and the *tapestries* put together!”

There was a long meaningful pause as the three boys stared at one another, absorbing the gravity of what they had just discovered. Finally, Wentworth spoke up, breaking the silence.

“Well, this is all marvelous,” he sighed, rolling his eyes and pulling James by the elbow. “I don’t know what any of it means or why I should care, but bully for all three of you. Now, can I maybe go back and finish my lunch?”

Here concludes chapter seventeen. 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.