



19. UNHELPFUL REVELATIONS

“They *killed* him?” Rose asked the following day, speaking through the Shard on the back of the dormitory room door. “Shot him dead, right there in the street?”

“It was like something from a movie,” Ralph nodded soberly. “Only in real life, it doesn’t feel so exciting. It was just sad and shocking and... sort of final. It didn’t *fix* anything that’d been done. It just stopped more bad things from happening.”

“The poor girl,” Rose said sadly, shaking her head. “Maybe Magnussen deserved what he got, but she’ll have to live with what she did for the rest of her life. That’s what courts of law are for.”

“Boohoo,” Scorpius scoffed, sitting on the other end of the sofa in the Gryffindor common room. “You think some Muggle court would be able to capture and convict someone like Magnussen? Don’t kid yourself. I’m more interested in the horseshoe anyway. Let us see it, why don’t you?”

James swallowed hard and turned toward his bunk. A moment later, he retrieved the black velvet bag from beneath his mattress.

“We haven’t found a decent hiding place for it yet,” he said, loosening the drawstring and sliding the cold metal shape into his right hand. “If it was too magical for Magnussen to keep on

campus, then the same is probably true for us. Someone's bound to sense its power and come sniffing around to see what it is."

He crossed to the Shard and held the horseshoe up before it, cradling the silvery weight gingerly in his palm. The metal was dulled and clouded with myriad scratches, but its shape was unmistakable. Purplish light glinted along its curved edges.

"It's bigger than I would have expected," Rose said, having approached the mirror on the Hogwarts side of the Shard. "It looks... heavy, somehow."

"It is," James admitted. "Almost like it comes from a place where gravity is less important. And it glows a little too. You can't see it unless all the lights are turned off and it's totally dark, but it's there, sort of faint purple, like the last bit of sunset."

"I can almost sense the magic from here," Rose said quietly. "You're right, you definitely need to hide it somewhere safe."

"At least until we can find a way to use it to get into the World Between the Worlds," Ralph nodded.

"But *that's* our main problem now," James said, turning back around and carrying the horseshoe to his bed.

On the other side of the Shard, Scorpius sighed. "Ah yes. Up until now, everyone believed that your Professor Magnussen had escaped into the Nexus with the help of his dimensional key. Now that you know that the man was, in fact, killed by a Muggle bullet, you have no way of knowing where the Nexus Curtain actually is."

"That was supposed to be the easy part," Ralph acknowledged, flopping back onto his bed. "We thought we'd just have to follow Magnussen to the Curtain. Getting the horseshoe from him was supposed to be the difficult bit."

James finished stuffing the horseshoe under his mattress again and stood up. "We're not completely stumped," he said stubbornly. "We still have Magnussen's other riddle. The one about the Nexus Curtain lying in the eyes of Roebitz. Zane's back working on that one again, although it's looking pretty bleak. There aren't a whole lot of Roebitzes in the world."

"I'll look it up on my side," Rose said briskly. "Maybe it isn't a person at all. You never know."

James sighed. "Thanks, Rose. We appreciate your help. Petra too."

"I'm doing this to help you and Uncle Harry find out the truth, James," Rose said, meeting his gaze through the glass of the Shard. "If it helps Petra, then that's all for the best. I'm not quite as confident about her as you are, though. Sorry."

James sighed again and nodded. From behind Rose, Scorpius watched James, his own eyes sharp, narrowed. Scorpius was more than unconvinced of Petra's innocence, James knew. Scorpius was outright suspicious of her.

Deep down, despite his own feelings to the contrary, James couldn't blame him.



As spring settled firmly over the school, tulips, daffodils, and snapdragons began to crowd the flowerbeds that lined the mall. The snapdragons, being of a magical variety, occasionally leaned lazily and nipped at the fat bumblebees that patrolled the flowerbeds. The days grew longer and warmer, and James finally packed away his winter cloak, happy to relegate it to the top of his closet along with his dress robes and the backup pair of spectacles that his mother had insisted he pack, which were, in reality, hand-me-downs from his father.

Clutchcudgel matches went from grueling dark and icy affairs to exhilarating romps through the mild evenings, lit by the rose-gold light of the later sunsets. Team Bigfoot continued its dogged refusal to be knocked out of the final tournament playoffs, winning a few matches, tying even more. Fortunately, since their standings had gradually improved over the course of the season, tie games often meant technical victories for the orange and blue team. No one expected the Foots to actually get into the final tournament, but at least no one expected them to get knocked out easily. James was quietly very proud of the team and his own unique involvement with it. Even if they still ended up dead last in the overall season standings, it would be a close thing. More importantly, the other teams respected Team Bigfoot now. Or, at the very least, didn't openly mock them.

Oliver Wood still showed a stubborn reluctance to encourage the use of anything other than the most basic magic during his team's matches. He did, however, allow the continuation of the team's game magic meetings and James began showing his fellow players some of the *Artis Decerto* tricks he'd learned during his last year's Defense Against the Dark Arts classes with Professor Kendrick Debellows.

"It isn't just about beating the other guy's magic with your own magic," he attempted to explain. "It's about beating his magic with your *mind*, by knowing what he's going to do even before he does it and being ready for it."

"Mind reading," Gobbins frowned skeptically. "I never understood that crazy voodoo stuff."

"It's not *voodoo*," Ralph said, shaking his head. "It's just knowing how people usually act and guessing what they're going to do before they do it. It's easier than you think. People are a lot less unpredictable than you'd ever guess."

James nodded enthusiastically. “Look at the Igers,” he said, standing up. “Say it’s the third quarter and they’re down by ten. You see three of their Clippers lining up around the second turn. What are they up to?”

Jazmine laughed and shook her head. “They’re stacking a pile-drive maneuver. Their lead Clipper has the Clutch and if he loses it somehow, he’ll just toss it back to the guy behind him. That way, they’ve got two-man insurance that they’ll make it to the goal.”

“*That’s* what I’m talking about,” James nodded, pointing at her. “We don’t have to wait to see what they’re going to do in that situation. We already *know* that’s their standard procedure, so *we* act *first*, sending some Bullies back to get in between them even before they line up. *That’s Artis Decerto!*”

“But that’s not *all* it is,” Wentworth said, tilting his head. “It’s also those crazy acrobatics you do out there on the skrim. You look like one of those guys from Cirque de Blasé.”

“My mom took me to that last year,” Norrick interjected.

Wentworth turned to him. “Did you like it?”

“Meh,” Norrick shrugged. “When I think circus, I think guys walking tightropes and taming tigers and making pyramids out of dozens of elephants and stuff. I don’t usually think of a bunch of dudes in tights swinging around on velvet ropes and doing yoga on flying carpets.”

“Sounds pretty interesting to *me*,” Jazmine admitted.

Norrick rolled his eyes. “That’s ’cause you’re a girl.”

“Thanks for noticing,” Jazmine replied sourly. “At least when *Ralph* says it, it sounds like a *good* thing.” She smiled at Ralph across the room and his cheeks reddened. He coughed lightly and looked helplessly at James.

“Yeah,” James nodded, struggling to stay on topic. “*Artis Decerto* is also about acrobatic kinds of stuff too. It’s just a matter of using your whole body sort of like a tool or a weapon or a torpedo, whatever best suits the situation. You put both ideas together, and not only will you know *what* the other guy is about to do, you’ll already be getting yourself into position to defeat it.”

“Like when you got between that Zombie Clipper and Bully last match!” Wentworth exclaimed, sitting forward. “And you pretended to have a Clutch under your arm so the Bully would aim a gravity well at you, but then you spun around up over the other guy at just the right moment and the Bully shot his spell at his own Clipper and knocked him right out of the course and then ran into him because he was so surprised that he didn’t even *see* the other guy behind you until you went all topsy-turvy and they both crashed into the ring like a couple of blind Rafewringers!” His eyes bulged excitedly at the memory and then he sighed deeply, leaning back again. “That was beautiful.”

“Zane sure didn’t think it was funny,” Ralph muttered. “Although he *did* admit that it was a pretty good move.”

“Yeah,” James agreed, nodding at Wentworth. “Like that.”

“But how do we practice stuff like *that*?” another player, Luca Fiorello, asked from the corner near the window.

James nodded resolutely. “Good question,” he admitted. “And you won’t like the answer, but... well... me, Ralph, Zane, and Professor Cloverhoof have set up something in the backyard. It’s not anywhere near as good as the one back at Hogwarts and Zane and Professor Cloverhoof only helped us build it because we agreed to let Team Zombie use it as well, but trust us, it’s the best way to learn *Artis Decerto*. Come on over and take a look.”

James led the team out onto the third-floor landing, where they all crowded around the window that overlooked the mansion’s walled back garden. There was a moment of tense, puzzled silence. Finally, Jazmine spoke up.

“What is it?” she asked, frowning.

James sighed at the irony of it all. In the yard below was a haphazard clockwork monstrosity of wooden cogs, treadmills, pommels, swinging weights, and wand-studded barrels.

“It’s called the Gauntlet,” he admitted. “And it’s about to be your worst enemy.”



Classes at Alma Aleron, which had at first seemed exotic and strange, had by now grown routine and even boring.

James’ favorite classes were Clockwork Mechanics, Advanced Elemental Transmutation (which was the American equivalent of Transfiguration), Theoretical Gravity (which was still being taught by Oliver Wood), and Magi-American History with Professor Paul Bunyan. Having lived the long and amazing life of a giant in the country’s frontier days, the professor taught a lot of his classes by way of firsthand stories. Some of the stories, admittedly, were embroidered with obvious tall tales, such as the details surrounding the origin of the Rocky Mountains (allegedly piles of cast-off rocks cleaned out of the giant’s boot treads with a redwood trunk) and the creation of the Great Lakes (claimed to have been dug out by the giant’s footprints when he was wrestling Babe, the giant blue ox, for the last pancake of a particularly delicious breakfast). A Vampire boy had once deigned to challenge Professor Bunyan’s tall tales, confronting him with the fact that while he was indeed quite large, he was nowhere near big enough to leave footprints the size of Lake Superior.

“Were you bigger back then, maybe?” the boy asked, a smile curling the corner of his mouth.

Professor Bunyan merely scoffed and waved a hand. “I was always the same size,” he said, his dark eyes twinkling. “But the *world* was a lot smaller back in those days. It’s a known fact. Just ask Professor Wimwinkle.”

James had a suspicion that Bunyan knew that no one would actually do any such thing, being generally terrified of the Mageography professor, thus his allegations were, nominally, safe.

Mageography was, in fact, near the top of the list of James’ least loved classes. Only marginally worse, however, was Forbidden Practices and Cursology with the insufferable Persephone Remora. Remora had, it seemed, developed a bit of a fixation with James and his famous father. As a result, her attitude toward him seemed to swing between doting favoritism and spiteful jealousy. James never knew, on any given Thursday afternoon, whether the professor would gesture for him to sit close to her in the front row—where she would favor him with conspiratorial winks and infuriatingly condescending pats on the head—or glower at him darkly, annoyed and impatient at his apparent lack of awe for her accomplishments and her self-proclaimed ‘dark wiles’. James’ last essay had been returned to him with the incomprehensible grade of ‘INSIPID +’ scrawled across the top of it in red, followed by the handwritten comment, ‘*You show mild promise IF you receive the proper tutelage. You know my office hours. See me.*’

“She either has a crush on you or she wants to poison you,” Zane whispered, peering at the handwriting atop James’ essay. “And you never know. With her, it could be both.”

“No way I’m seeking her out for ‘proper tutelage,’” James hissed from behind his hand. “I’ll take ‘insipid plus’ for the rest of the year if I have to.”

From the front of the classroom, Remora narrowed her eyes at him, her red lips pressed into a tight frown.

The rest of the semester’s classes dragged on with varying degrees of boredom, challenge, and occasional strangeness. Muggle Occupation Studies, for instance, seemed to be the Alma Aleron version of Muggle Studies, but with a specific emphasis on learning about Muggle careers and working conditions. Most of the class-times were spent on discussions of the difference between such concepts as ‘water cooler breaks’ and ‘coffee runs’, ‘cubicles’ versus ‘corner offices’, elevator etiquette, surreptitious use of magic in Muggle surroundings, and how to converse about the sorts of things most Muggles seemed to be interested in, such as Muggle sports, television, and the weather. James didn’t quite understand the point of the class since he himself planned to become an Auror like his father, but the teacher, a very fat woman by the name of Heather Wocziak (who, for some reason, nearly always wore a pink jogging outfit) insisted that Muggle occupational familiarity was “absolutely essential for all witches and wizards in the current social climate of magical-Muggle diversification”. James accepted this with a sigh, secretly vowing to forget everything he was learning once the final exams were over.

Potion-Making class continued to be an intriguing challenge despite the noticeable lack of Petra as Professor Baruti’s assistant. Besides teaching traditional Native American forms of potion-making via visits to the ancient city of Shackamaxon, Baruti spent much time demonstrating potion techniques from many of the world’s magical cultures, including Oriental enchanTeas, African steamcreatures, and Russian cold-soup tonics, most of which were made with a very potent clear

liquor known as Stortch, known to melt cauldrons if they were not thoroughly pre-oiled with a thick coating of mucous eel slime.

James had once approached Professor Baruti after class and asked how things were going with Petra.

“Ms. Morganstern is coming along very well,” Baruti replied easily, displaying one of his stunningly bright smiles. “I see her once a week, most of the time. She misses her freedom, but her French is *très magnifique*.”

James nodded. “Any word about the investigation with that Keynes bloke? I haven’t heard a word about it from my parents. I think they’re trying to keep me from worrying about it, but I can handle it.”

Baruti clucked his tongue and shook his head dismissively. “Don’t you worry about that, young Master James. Ms. Morganstern is not worried! Why should you be? If tomorrow brings trouble, it will bring the solution as well.” He patted James on the shoulder with his large callused hand and James nodded disconsolately.

The only class that James was performing particularly poorly in was Arithmetics. Taught by a young professor named Plumvole with far more enthusiasm for the subject than actual teaching ability, James simply couldn’t wrap his mind around the long, dense formulas and symbols scrawled onto the magical blackboard. As a result, he was pressed to attend occasional tutoring sessions with Professor Plumvole in his office on the fifth floor of Administration Hall. The professor was thoroughly patient with James, explaining the concepts over and over on parchment while James leaned on the desk, his forehead cradled helplessly in his hands. He still didn’t understand the equations, but Plumvole was so infatuated with his own explanations that he didn’t notice James’ complete lack of involvement.

As a result, Plumvole completed all of James’ homework while James himself merely watched. At the end of the last session, Plumvole clapped James heartily on the shoulder, promising that they were making excellent progress. Sheepishly, James nodded, shrugged and bid the professor goodnight.

It was growing dark outside the Administration Hall’s tall windows as James meandered his way to the ground floor. Passing a set of propped-open auditorium doors, however, he heard a familiar voice. It was Professor Wood giving a lecture to an audience of college-level students. James remembered that Wood taught a subject called Ethics of Magic, which Zane had promised was ‘dead boring’. Still, James was curious. He stopped to listen, hovering just inside the open doorway.

“So,” Wood was saying, turning to a huge blackboard and pointing his wand at it, “the question of intervention revolves around these three primary questions: motive, benefit, and repercussion.

“Before considering any intervention in the affairs of our Muggle fellows, we must *honestly* ask ourselves: one: why are we doing it? Is it truly for the Muggles’ good? Or for another, more selfish reason? Two: what is the *real benefit* that might be gained by such an intervention? Is it worth the risks involved? We cannot judge this on feelings alone; we must answer this impartially

and honestly. Finally, what are all the possible repercussions of such an action? As in the example, if a fellow wizard is being attacked by Muggle robbers in an alley and we Stun the leader within sight of his cohorts, is the damage of that magical revelation worth the money that the attackers might have stolen? This is a safe example for it involves only money and is therefore easier to consider. But the equation might well involve lives rather than coin. It is ethically incumbent on us to consider: if we save a life but harm the integrity of the magical/Muggle worlds for thousands of others, *is* that a worthy intervention?

“There are no obvious conclusions, but as we have seen in the examples, any interaction between the Muggle and magical world that fails in any one of these considerations threatens, at the very least, the integrity of those involved, and potentially, the very stability of our twin cultures. Easy answers are tempting, as we all know—answers that rely on emotion and goodwill and basic concepts of immediate justice—but easy answers can lead to horrific consequences. This is the weight of responsibility that we, unlike our Muggle brothers, bear. It is no easy burden, but that does not give us an excuse to shrug it off. We must consider the fact that, despite how we might feel, *sometimes* it is better—and more deeply responsible—to do nothing. Sometimes we cannot trust our feelings alone. Sometimes, the heart is a liar.”

James didn't quite understand everything that Wood was saying, but the last part stuck with him: *sometimes the heart is a liar*. Petra Morganstern had, in fact, said something almost exactly like that, James remembered. Months earlier, when they'd talked, strangely enough, about the Bible story of Adam and Eve. Eve had born the burden of the same sort of responsibility that Wood was talking about—the responsibility to consider that sometimes what felt right was, in fact, exactly the wrong thing to do. *She wasn't evil*, Petra had said that day, as they'd walked toward the Warring Willow under Professor Baruti's shimmering rainbow umbrella. *She was just... misinformed. She was doing what she felt was best.*

Sometimes... the heart is a liar, Petra had told him that day, her eyes solemn. In James' memory, though, Petra didn't sound quite like she meant it. She sounded more as if she was *trying on* the concept, the way someone might try on a shoe or a hat just to see if it fit.

For some reason, the thought made James shudder. Without waiting for Professor Wood to finish his lecture, he turned and followed the hall toward the stairs at the far end, shaking his head worriedly.

It was fully dark outside by the time James crossed the campus, heading toward Apollo Mansion. The mall was virtually deserted, lit by the occasional lamppost and the glow of lights from the other houses. Light glinted off a large dark orb as James passed a pool. Stopping, he saw that it was the Octosphere. It turned slowly, shimmering in the moonlight and creating its soft, almost inaudible rumble. James frowned at it in the darkness, thinking.

Professor Magnussen had created the Octosphere, his first attempt at reading all things in the universe at once and therefore predicting—and controlling—the future. Everyone believed that Magnussen had finally succeeded, in a way: they believed that he'd escaped into the World Between the Worlds, leaving this dimension forever. James knew the truth, however. Magnussen had been struck down in vengeance for the acts he'd committed in pursuit of his horrible plan. He may once

have trod the World Between the Worlds, as he had claimed in the Disrecorder vision, but he certainly had not ended up there. As Kendrick Debellows had once said during last year's classes, the warrior who trusts only in the greatness of his magic will trip over the smallest stone. Magnussen had been extremely arrogant, and he had tripped over the smallest stone imaginable—one the size of a single Muggle bullet.

Suddenly, James remembered that he, himself, had very nearly interfered with that reality. He had jumped out from his hiding place in the alley, wand in hand, prepared to duel Magnussen rather than watch him kill the Muggle man, William. If he had intervened only a second earlier, he probably would have interrupted Helen in the act of aiming her pistol. What would have happened? Would Magnussen have defeated them all? Might James, Ralph, and Zane have somehow prevailed over the professor and saved Helen from the act of shooting him? How would that have affected history and the lives of all those involved?

James shook his head and shivered. Wood was right: it was scary to consider the repercussions of such things. James himself had very nearly changed history, and in a rather dramatic way. Somehow, he knew that it was best that he had not—that his intervention had been a split second too late. Maybe it wasn't the best possible reality that Helen had shot and killed Magnussen, but James was secretly sure that if things had gone any other way, it could have been far worse in the end.

But what about now? Was he, James, interfering again? His own mother and father had warned him not to get involved in any more grandiose adventures. Even Patches the cat seemed to have offered warnings, first suggesting they rush for Igor House and then appearing in the Archive, apparently cautioning them against viewing the Disrecorder visions of Professor Magnussen. Should James have heeded those warnings? He'd tried to in the beginning. And yet how could he allow Petra to go to prison for something she might not have done? Wasn't it his responsibility to help her? Or, at the very least, to do what he could to reveal the truth of what had really happened that night, when the Vault of Destinies had been attacked?

There are no easy answers, Wood had said. James shook his head slowly, knowing that the professor was right. He drew a deep breath and plopped down onto the low wall that bordered the pool of the Octosphere. The great black orb turned hypnotically, rumbling faintly.

"Tell me, Octosphere," James said in a low voice, staring at the huge stone shape, "am I doing the wrong thing? Should I just leave well enough alone?"

The orb continued to turn, as if it didn't intend to answer such a vague question. Then, however, it began to slow. Cloudy letters swam up from the orb's murky depths. James leaned closer and squinted as the words formed, glowing dimly in the moonlight.

BETTER NOT TELL YOU NOW.

James frowned. He knew that the Octosphere was rumored never to give helpful answers, but it was *always* supposed to give a *correct* answer, no matter how indecipherable. He decided to try again, being more specific.

“All right,” he said. “Will I make something awful happen by trying to help Petra?”

Immediately, the white words faded from the surface of the orb. It began to turn again, first slowly, and then faster so that water crept up the sides of the sphere, running back in trickling rivulets. Finally, after nearly a minute, the orb slowed again. Dim shapes swam deep within it, resolving slowly. James leaned close, watching the letters float to the surface, as if from a very deep, dark well.

YOU WILL NOT.

James read the words over several times and then breathed a long sigh of relief. Perhaps the legends about the Octosphere were wrong. After all, this was a clear answer, both helpful and straightforward. As long as it was true, then there was nothing to worry about. And according to Zane, the Octosphere’s answers were *always* true, even if they weren’t obvious.

James shuddered again, feeling a cool breeze ripple over the campus and shush in the nearby trees. He stood up again and continued on his way to Apollo Mansion, renewed in his mission even if he didn’t know exactly what he was supposed to do next. Neither he, Ralph, nor Zane knew the location of the Nexus Curtain or the meaning of Magnussen’s remaining riddle. Still, at least he could feel some confidence that they weren’t going to ruin everything even if they did figure it all out.

In the darkness behind him, the glowing words began to drift slowly into the depths of the Octosphere and it began to turn again, slowly, resuming its low rumble. No one was there to see it, but the word ‘You’ remained visible for nearly a minute after the others had faded out, almost as if it had some special, secret emphasis.

After all, the Octosphere always told the truth. But it was *never* helpful.



On the third Saturday in April, James, Zane, and Ralph climbed their way to the library in the Tower of Art, ostensibly to do homework, but also in hopes of researching a new lead in the Roebitz riddle.

The library occupied the space immediately below the penthouse museum and took up the equivalent of three full floors with its dizzyingly tall bookshelves and rolling ladders, long polished tables decked with green Bankers Lamps, and overhanging balconies, stairways, and landings. High in the very center of the space, visible from nearly every angle, hung a monstrous crystal chandelier, its thousands of pendants winking rainbow prisms in the glinting candlelight.

Around this, somewhat unsettlingly, books of all sizes flew like bats, flapping their covers, their ribbon bookmarkers trailing behind them like kite tails. James had been to the library several times before he realized that the flying books were actually part of the library's shelving system. Loose tomes would occasionally soar up from the carts next to the front desk and circle the chandelier, almost as if it were a sort of roundabout. One at a time, the books would eventually swoop back down toward the leaning monolithic bookshelves, furl their covers with a soft *thunk*, and slip into place with their fellows.

James had a strange suspicion that part of the reason that the books spent so much time circling the chandelier was because they were (being magical books) very slightly alive and liked the hustle and bustle of what the librarian referred to as 'the sorting cloud'. The ripple of their pages and the gentle clap of their covers as the books circled the chandelier sounded vaguely like whispered speech and James couldn't help wondering if the books spent their time in the cloud trading gossip stories about the students and teachers below.

Considering the way James sometimes treated his own library books, this was not a very comforting thought.

"This really seems like a long shot," Ralph whispered as they settled down to a table on the edge of one of the upper balconies. "I mean, fish eggs?"

"*Roe*," Zane replied, annoyed. "Fish eggs are called roe. *Roe*-bits? It's worth checking out, at least. Maybe Magnussen was really into aquariums or something. Maybe he hid the secret of the Nexus Curtain in some fish food and fed it to his pet catfish, which then had baby fish... and... er."

James pressed his lips together tentatively. "It's a long shot," he said, agreeing with Ralph.

"I don't see *you* two coming up with any genius brainstorm," Zane grouched, pulling a huge picture book toward him. On the front of it was a moving photograph of the Loch Ness Monster snapping its prodigious jaws. The title was embossed in gold: '*MAGICAL FISH and MARINE LIFE OF THE WORLD*'.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," James said, slipping out of his seat. "I need to find a book for my kettles and cauldrons Home Ec paper."

"Don't remind me," Ralph said, rolling his eyes. "I have to write a paragraph on the difference between cupcakes and muffins."

“You ought to be an expert on that,” Zane said without looking up from his book. “You ate three of each at breakfast just this morning.”

Ralph frowned. “It was research,” he said a little defensively.

James worked his way back down the stairs to the main floor and then meandered through several rows of tall, crooked bookshelves. The highest levels seemed to totter precariously over him, their books threatening to spill from their shelves at the slightest provocation.

After several turns, James finally found the reference section. Huge dusty volumes lined the shelves, bowing the wood under their accumulated weight. Finally, near the end of the aisle, James found what he was looking for. An entire section was devoted to an anthology of huge encyclopedias, all arranged by letter and subject. There appeared to be thousands of volumes in the collection, each cloth-bound in frayed beige, their spines nearly two feet tall. James craned his neck to see into the upper levels of the bookcase and then pulled one of the wheeled ladders toward him. The rungs squeaked as he began to climb.

He stopped halfway up the ladder and reached carefully for a particular volume. A huge embossed letter *S* decorated the top portion of the spine. Beneath this were the words ‘*SNYXPORIUM through SORDHISIUS*’. Clutching the heavy book against his chest, James inched back down the ladder. He sat down cross-legged on the floor at the base of the ladder and cradled the huge volume on his knees. After a brief pause, he opened it.

The book smelled like mildew and dust, but its pages were thick and creamy-smooth, yellowed only slightly along the edges. Full-page illustrations filled the book alongside dense fields of small print.

Normally, of course, this was the sort of thing Rose would be assigned to do. As Zane had said, she really was like their very own personal research department. Some things, however, James had been reluctant to share even with his closest companions. The topic he was looking up now was one of those things. He began to riffle through the encyclopedia’s pages as quietly as possible until he reached a particular heading, nearly halfway through. He stared down at the words, his lips pressed into a thin line.

SORCERESS: *see Sorcerer, female.*

Slowly, James turned back a page. Leaning slightly lower over the book, he began to read.

SORCERER:

Defined simplistically as a magical human male, a sorcerer should not be confused with a wizard. While both are primarily determined by their predisposition to spellwork, potion-making, and the use of magical objects, there is a marked difference in the fundamental source of those powers. While witches and wizards draw upon magical resources within their own bodies (see: *Intrinsic*

Magic), sorcerers collect their powers from external resources, such as growing things, kinetic energy reserves (oceans), or even the passage of time (see: *Elemental Magic, types and uses*). For this reason, sorcerers (or, in the Old Language, *Sourcereurs*) are potentially far more powerful than a typical witch or wizard depending on the residual magical resources of their surroundings. Similarly, where a typical magical individual's power is a constant, a sorcerer's power may be diminished to the point of abject weakness if he is cut off from those magical resources.

It is interesting to note, however, that in every recorded instance, a sorcerer only derives power from *one type* of extrinsic source. For instance, a sorcerer who draws his strength from growing things will find himself considerably weakened when placed within a desert environment. Theoretically, this is an example of the law of conservation of powers, which predicts that *absolute* power will always be prohibited within a balanced natural world.

Origins and Explanations:

While there are many theories regarding the origins of sorcerers, none have been conclusively proven. All such theories, however, can be broken up into two predominant categories: the *Serendipitous* and the *Causational*.

The Serendipitous theory states that a sorcerer is *always* created when a certain series of variable requirements are met. The most well-known Serendipitous theory is the "seventh son of a seventh son" premise, which merely states that any seventh male offspring of a wizard who is, himself, a seventh male offspring will, without exception, be a sorcerer. Other theories are far more complicated, suggesting deviations in times of the year, phases of the moon, ages and lineage of the parents, and even the number of windows in the room of the child's birth.

Adherents to the Causational theory, however, postulate a much different origin, owing itself not at all to randomly determined variables but to the balance of the magical world in general. In short, the Causational theory states that when the scales of the cosmos require a sorcerer (either to maintain balance or to destroy it), then a sorcerer will, out of sheer necessity, appear.

Notably, one variation of the Causational theory adds that there can never be only *one* sorcerer. In order for the polarities of destiny to remain in check (the theory claims) there must always be a duality: either no sorcerers whatsoever or two. This theory, however, like all the rest, has never been proven or disproven.

Historical Examples:

While any number of legendary sorcerers have appeared in the annals of history, there are very few documented cases of the existence of such individuals.

The most well-known and verified instance is Merlinus Ambrosius, whose powers, mysterious origins, and legendary disappearance describe the very archetype of the classical sorcerer.

During his lifetime, he was known to conjure feats of such devastating natural ferocity, including (but not limited to) earthquakes, floods, typhoons, walking forests, and tidal waves, that he was by turns revered and/or vilified by all who knew of him. Since his time (approximately 935-980 AD) there has been no uncontested evidence of another living sorcerer.

Variations—Elves, Goblins, Sorceresses

While both elvenkind and goblinkind also derive their powers from extrinsic magical sources, they are *not* technically considered sorcerers (despite long-standing arguments by goblin leaders and species rights advocates). Since both goblins and elves can only *contain* the equivalent of any average magical person's power, they do not meet the 'Limitless Magical Expression requirement' (set forth by the *Magical Defining Characteristics Census of 1177*) for sorcerer status.

Contrariwise, there has existed a long-standing theory that claims that the existence of sorcerers implies, by logical necessity, the possibility of sorceresses—that is, a female whose source of power is extrinsic and who is capable of summoning limitless expressions of that extrinsic resource based upon its availability. Despite this, no irrefutable example of such a person has ever been verified.

James lowered the book and leaned slowly back, letting his head bump the bookshelf behind him. For several seconds, he merely stared up past the canyon of the leaning bookcases toward the books which flapped silently through the library's upper levels, winging toward their shelves.

It made perfect sense. That was the most dreadful part. The passage in the encyclopedia was like the center piece of a puzzle, the one that brought all the separate bits together and formed the full picture. As incredible as it seemed—as completely gut-wrenchingly unbelievable as it would appear to any sane observer—Petra Morganstern... was a sorceress.

James shook his head slowly, barely able to grasp the concept.

He remembered the first time he had met Petra, back on his first night at Hogwarts. Ted had introduced her to him along with the rest of the Gremlins. She had seemed merely pretty and smart then, the perfect foil for the brash insolence of the rest of the Gremlins. James had had classes with her throughout that year. In all honesty, he had begun, even then, to feel the faintest stirrings of romantic magnetism toward her. Most assuredly, there was something unique about her—something rare and slightly dark, both inspiring and solemn. Even so, how could this slight, smart girl—the one with the tendency to suck thoughtfully on the ends of her raven-dark hair and doodle

dancing elves in the margins of her textbooks—how could that girl possibly be something so powerful, so rare, and so potentially frightening as a sorceress?

And yet, of course, James knew it was true. It *had* to be true. Everything pointed to it, from the mysteries surrounding her last day at Morganstern Farm to the amazing magic she seemed to perform without any wand to the strange silver thread that had appeared when she'd fallen from the back of the *Gwynndemere*—conjured by James, but drawn, apparently, from her own power.

Merlin, of course, was a sorcerer. Was that why he was so interested in Petra? Was that why he was worried about what she might do? Was she his equal? His *opposite*?

James shuddered, violently, and the encyclopedia nearly fell off his lap. Instinctively, he grabbed at it and then closed it with a soft thump.

For the first time, seriously, he wondered if Petra really *had* been involved in the attack on the Vault of Destinies. Thus far, James had been able to convince himself that it couldn't really have been her that he'd seen on that night coming out of the Archive alongside the creepy woman in the black robes. He'd convinced himself that it had to have been a trick—someone using Polyjuice Potion, for instance, or perhaps even a *Visum-ineptio* charm. But what if none of that was true? What if Petra really *was* in league with the mysterious dark woman, and had been lying all along about her innocence? Worse, what if the Morgan part of Petra's mind, the part influenced by the final shred of Lord Voldemort's soul, had broken free of the mental prison that Petra had erected for it—the black castle in her dreams—and had *taken over* somehow?

What if James, Ralph, and Zane succeeded in breaking through to the World Between the Worlds only to find irrefutable proof that it *had* been Petra (Morgan) who had broken into the Hall of Archives, cursed Mr. Henredon, and then stolen the crimson thread from the foreign dimension's Vault of Destinies? What then? Would the courts send Petra to wizarding prison?

Perhaps even worse, would they be *unable* to?

For one bright, horrible moment, James envisioned the dark-haired girl (Petra/Morgan) walking resolutely down the center of a broad road, peppered with green Killing Curses and yet unfazed, her brow lowered in cold fury, her eyes flashing black sparks and lightning crackling between her clawed fingertips.

She's not evil, he told himself resolutely. It was almost a mantra, an incantation. In his deepest heart, he both believed it utterly and doubted it hopelessly. The friction between the two warring convictions was nearly overwhelming, almost like a breaking heart.

"Petra's not evil," he whispered, his eyes wide and bright in the darkness of the library aisle. "She's just..." He cut himself off with a gasp, realizing what he was about to say. Suddenly, he felt very cold, chilled nearly to the bone. This time, when the encyclopedia tried to slide off of his crossed legs, James let it. He barely even noticed.

She's not evil, he thought helplessly. *She's just... misinformed.*

Like Eve. Just misinformed.



“What’s with you, James?” Zane asked the following Thursday as the three left Cursology class and made their way into a bright, warm afternoon.

James hefted his books and squinted into the sunlight. “Nothing. Why?”

“You’ve been all quiet lately,” Zane pressed. “Even Ralph’s noticed.”

Ralph nodded. “S’ttrue. You didn’t even show up for Clutch magic practice the other day. I had to power the Gauntlet myself. Didn’t go so well either.”

Zane laughed and clapped Ralph on the shoulder. “That’s ’cause you still haven’t learned to rein in that Godzilla wand of yours. I hear the Gauntlet was running so fast that parts of it were a blur. Is that true?”

“The team sure didn’t think it was funny,” Ralph admitted, raking his fingers through his hair. “But it definitely sharpened their reflexes. I swear, at one point, it looked like Fiorello was in two places at once trying to evade one of those clockwork battering arms.”

“I’m fine,” James sighed, approaching the sprawling ruin of Roberts’ burnt mansion. He plopped onto a broken wall and stared out along the sunlit mall. “I’m just annoyed that we haven’t figured this last bit out yet. I mean, we can’t keep the horseshoe hidden forever. Someone’s going to sniff it out and then we’ll be totally sunk.”

Zane shrugged and joined James on the broken end of the wall. Tall grass swished around the boys’ feet where they dangled over the side. “I don’t know,” he replied. “Hiding the unicorn’s shoe in the roots of the Warping Willow was totally genius. That horseshoe may have some powerful mojo in it, but if it’s stronger than the Willow, I’ll eat a Clutch. That’s a big score for the Ralphinator.”

“It was nothing,” Ralph said, trying not to grin with pride. “I was just thinking back to our first year when Delacroix hid the Merlin throne right on Hogwarts grounds since it was the only place in the country that was magical enough and protected enough to overshadow that kind of power. If it worked for her, I thought it might work for us.”

Zane nodded. “It’s an excellent idea no matter what. I bet if old Mags had thought of it, he might actually have *made* it to the World Between the Worlds and not gotten shot down in an alley like a cowboy at high noon.”

James shook his head, not at all sharing in his friends' carefree attitudes. "It's just that it's *taking* too long," he said, smacking his hand on the stone next to him. "That idiot Keynes, the arbiter, is nearly finished with his inspection. Dad sent me a note saying that he ran into him at the Crystal Mountain. Keynes told him that he wouldn't need to interview any of us after all, said that he'd found all the information he needed elsewhere. That can only mean one thing, can't it? He's about ready to make his judgment and he's found just what he needed to convict Petra and send her to prison!"

"But who could he have talked to?" Ralph asked, kicking at the weeds near a fallen chunk of stone wall. "We were the only witnesses to what happened. Who else would tell him that someone that looked an awful lot like Petra came walking out afterwards? I mean, the only people we told were Rose and Scorpius through the Shard. If Keynes had talked to them, they definitely would have told us."

James frowned dourly. Ralph may be right about Rose, but James himself wasn't so sure about Scorpius. "Either way, if we're going to figure out this stupid riddle, we'd better do it right quick. Otherwise, there won't be any point. They'll have passed judgment on Petra and carted her off and Izzy will wind up in some Muggle foster home, probably with all her memories of us completely Obliviated."

"But we've checked out everything we could think of," Zane said, raising his eyebrows and hands at the same time. "We got bupkis! If the Nexus Curtain lies within the eyes of Roebitz, then Roebitz sure ain't talking about it. *I'm* all out of ideas and I know from experience that that means *you* two are completely tapped out as well." He sighed and shook his head.

"Hey, *I'm* the one what thought of hiding the horseshoe under the Warping Willow," Ralph reminded the blonde boy, scowling in annoyance. Zane shrugged again and rolled his eyes.

"I just hate feeling stuck like this," James grouched darkly. "We're so *close* and yet we're completely stymied. I feel like that bloke Roberts who had to live on top of the sunken Aquapolis like a shipwreck survivor, so close to civilization, but cut off from it, all alone up on top with nothing but the waves and the seagulls to keep him company." He leaned forward and crossed his forearms over his knees, exhaling dourly. A moment later, he realized that Zane was staring hard at him.

"*What* did you just say?" the blonde boy asked in a low, emphatic voice.

James shrugged it off. "It was just this bloke that we met on the journey here. He lived on the very top of the Aquapolis, the part that poked up out of the ocean like an island whenever the city was sunk beneath the surface..."

"No, no," Zane said, his eyes growing sharp. "Before that! *What* did you say his name was?"

James glanced quizzically back at Zane, but it was Ralph who answered.

"Roberts?" he said. "What's the big deal about that?"

Zane's eyes bulged. He looked back and forth between James and Ralph in apparent amazement. "*What's the big deal?*" he exclaimed. "You two just *said* it! *Roebitz!* You're seriously telling me that this island dude's name was *Roebitz?*"

James looked aside at Ralph. "We didn't *say* *Roebitz*," he replied in a puzzled voice. "We said *Roberts*. Can't you hear?"

"Spell it!" Zane demanded, nearly vibrating with excitement.

Ralph sighed, and spelled out the name. Zane's eyes bulged even further.

"It's your accent!" he said, as if to himself. "The English accent! When you say *Roberts*... it *sounds* like *Roebitz!*"

"*We* don't have any accent," Ralph scowled. "You Americans do."

"Don't you see?" Zane said, pushing James hard enough to nearly knock him off the stone wall. "Magnussen spoke with the same accent you two do! He never approved of the country's break from England and insisted on speaking the same way you Brits do! He called it 'the King's English', remember?"

James' own eyes began to widen slowly. "In the Disrecorder vision," he said, "when Franklyn was explaining Magnussen's riddles, he *imitated* Magnussen's *accent!* We didn't recognize it, though since Franklyn's an American. We heard it wrong because we didn't recognize that he was mimicking the way Magnussen *spoke*. He didn't say 'Roebitz' at all!"

Ralph finished the thought for all of them. "He said *Roberts*," the big boy breathed in a low voice, glancing at his friends. "The Nexus Curtain... lies within the eyes of *Roberts!*"

All three boys stared at one another, dumbstruck. Slowly, they all turned toward the ruin behind them, looking up over the broken bits of garden wall and the weed-choked stairs toward the remains of the grand façade. The lintel over the door still bore the engraved name of the original owner: 'ROBERTS'.

In front of this, jutting crookedly up out of the tall grass, just as always, was the statue of the man himself, his stern face weathered with age, his wand held purposely at his side.

"The eyes of *Roberts*," James said quietly, suddenly flush with adrenaline.

"It *can't* be that easy," Ralph muttered, shaking his head. "Can it?"

"Only one way to find out," Zane said, jumping down from the stone wall and clapping his hands together. "Whaddaya say, Ralph? Feel like giving me a little boost?"



Three minutes later, James stood in the shadow of the statue of Roberts, peering up at Zane as he stood atop Ralph's shoulders, struggling to reach the back of the statue's head.

"It's a good thing this thing's pedestal is mostly buried in the dirt," Ralph grunted. "Otherwise we'd never be able to reach the top of it."

"There're holes in the back of the head!" Zane called down. "Two of them, side by side, see? Push me up a little higher, Ralph."

"I'm pushing as high as I can," Ralph groaned, struggling to stand on tiptoes. "What do you see?"

"Nothing," Zane said, his voice muffled as he pressed his eyes to the back of the statue's head. "The holes go all the way through the statue, right out the eyes, as far as I can tell. But there isn't anything inside here at all."

James frowned, and then a burst of inspiration struck him. "Can you see through the front?" he called up. "Like, what if the secret isn't literally *in* his eyes. What if it's what he's looking at?"

Zane was silent for a moment as he struggled to line up his own eyes with the holes in the back of the statue's head. Finally, he shook his head.

"No good," he replied. "It's all blurry. I can't line up the holes, somehow. It's like being totally near-sighted."

"Hurry it up," Ralph grunted. "Your heels are like anvils. How can a skinny little prat like you weigh so bloody much?"

"Wait a minute!" James said suddenly. "I've got an idea!"

Swiftly, he dropped his knapsack and unzipped it. He dug for several seconds and finally retrieved something from the bag's recesses.

"Here," he said, jumping up and turning to Ralph. "Hand these up to him."

"Your glasses?" Ralph frowned, glancing at the object in his hands. "You're serious?"

"It could work!" James insisted. "Just hand them up to him!"

"Let's see 'em, Ralph," Zane called down, reaching. "You never know. James is due for a good idea one of these times."

Ralph reached up and handed the glasses off to Zane. Carefully, Zane stretched up again, wrapping his arm around the statue's neck and pushing the glasses onto the stony face.

"Uh oh," he said suddenly.

"What!?" James called.

“I heard a crack,” the blonde boy called back. “I think ol’ Roberts has a bigger head than you, James. I think he broke the nose of your specs. Sorry.”

James sighed. “I have a spare,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Can you see any better?”

Zane pressed his eyes to the back of Roberts’ carved head again. There was a long, tense moment as he adjusted the glasses and struggled to pull himself into position. He was nearly riding piggyback on the statue’s leaning back now.

“It works!” he finally announced. “Sorta.”

“What do you mean ‘sorta?’” Ralph asked.

Zane adjusted the spectacles on the statue’s face again. “Well,” he called down, “I can see through Roberts’ eyes all right. The glasses work almost like a telescope. It’s just that there isn’t much to see. At least, not anything that’s very helpful.”

“What is it?” James demanded, nearly hopping with impatience.

“Roberts seems to just be staring straight down the mall toward Administration Hall,” Zane replied, still peering through the back of the statue’s head. “He’s looking right at the front doors, in fact. They’re propped open, so I can see right through the main corridor. Hey! There’s Albus and Lucy! Probably going to get an early dinner.”

James shook his head. “That *can’t* be the secret entrance to the Nexus Curtain. We’ve been in there a hundred times.”

“Well, that’s what’s in the eyes of Roberts,” Zane called back. “Maybe we should go snoop around in there a little more. Who knows what might be—” He stopped suddenly and pressed himself harder against the back of the statue’s head, frowning slightly.

“*What?*” Ralph asked impatiently. “What might be what?”

“Hold on,” Zane said. “Someone’s opening up the doors on the other end of the main corridor now. I can see straight through the whole building. Cool.”

James waited. He knew what was on the other end of the campus, behind Administration Hall. Victory Hill was the honorary home of every year’s Clutchcudgel tournament winner. According to tradition, the night of the final match was marked by the magical March of the Houses, when the winning team’s residence would magically arise from its cellar and circle the campus, coming to rest on the permanent foundation atop the hill near Pepperpock Down. Unfortunately, Zane himself had not witnessed a March of the Houses, nor had anyone else for the past ten years or so, since Team Werewolf had handily won the Clutchcudgel tournament for over a decade, thus holding onto that position of honor.

“It’s just Ares Mansion,” Zane called down. “I can only see the base of it through the back of Administration Hall, up on Victory Hill. *Man*, I hate those guys.”

“Is that it?” Ralph asked, exasperated.

“That’s it,” Zane replied. “Just the foundation up on Victory Hill with that big mausoleum house of theirs sitting on top of it. The only part that’s really visible is the cornerstone with that weird little ‘U’ engraved on it.”

James frowned. “Weird little ‘U’?”

“Yeah,” Zane sighed. “On the cornerstone of the permanent foundation, there’s just this odd symbol like a little letter ‘U’. Nobody knows what it stands for. ‘University’ maybe? Or ‘U are here?’”

James narrowed his eyes very thoughtfully. “Are you certain...,” he asked slowly, “that it’s a ‘U’?”

He peered up at Zane. The blonde boy looked down at him. Slowly, his eyebrows rose up onto his forehead as his eyes widened.

Ralph’s knees buckled slightly. In a strained voice, he said, “This means you can get off my shoulders now, right?”



“What do *you* three want?” an older Werewolf boy called from the high portico of Ares Mansion as James, Zane and Ralph approached. James recognized the speaker as Clayton Altaire, the captain of the Werewolf Clutch team.

“Oh, we’re just here to bask in your glory for a minute,” Zane replied from the footpath that circled Victory Hill. “Don’t pay any attention to us.”

Altaire scowled at them suspiciously. “What’s that you got in the bag, then?”

“Oh, this?” James asked, his face reddening. He looked down at the black velvet bag in his right hand. “It’s nothing. Just, er...”

“It’s his Technomancy homework,” Ralph volunteered. “Totally dangerous stuff. Strictly experimental magic. I wouldn’t even look directly at it if I was you.”

Altaire nodded skeptically toward Zane. “I know you, Walker. If you’re trying to prank us...”

“Me?” Zane asked, his face a mask of wounded innocence. “Never! Why, I’ll have you know that this here is James Potter! His brother is Albus, one of your Werewolf brethren. We’d *never* do anything to cause any trouble for little ol’ Al, would we fellas?” He looked back and forth between James and Ralph, who nodded silently.

“Albus,” Altaire smirked. “Yeah, our little Cornelius. I’ll tell him you ‘popped in for a chat’.” He turned and walked into the shadow of the doorway, chuckling to himself.

“Yeah, you do that, stump-head,” Zane muttered, rolling his eyes. He turned to James. “All right, come on. Let’s see if it fits.”

“I don’t like having that thing out in broad daylight,” Ralph said, following closely as James and Zane angled toward the corner of Ares Mansion, passing a rather large bronze statue of a fiercely snarling werewolf with blank amber eyes embedded into its face. James knew that the statue had been a gift from an alumnus, erected some ten years ago. Albus had told him that the members of the Werewolf Clutchcudgel team ritualistically rubbed the statue’s snarling muzzle on every game day as they made their way to Pepperpock Down. James shuddered as he passed before the glinting bronze figure, not liking that frozen, toothy growl.

As the three approached the cornerstone of the house’s permanent foundation, James saw that it was quite a large block of solid granite. At the very top of it, engraved right up to the edge, was a squat U-shape.

“It’ll only take a second, Ralph,” James said, feeling rather nervous himself. “We just need to see if it’s the same shape. If the horseshoe is the dimensional key, then this could be the keyhole. If it’s not, then we’ll just take it back and hide it under the Warping Willow again.”

Ralph gulped. “You mean if it fits, we’re going to go through into the World Between the Worlds right *now*?”

“Relax, Ralphinator,” Zane hissed impatiently. “We’re just going to see if it works. We’ll come back later for our big entrance if all goes as planned.”

Glancing around to assure no one was watching, James slipped the silver horseshoe from its bag. The three boys crowded around the cornerstone as he held it up next to the engraved shape.

“Well,” Ralph said hesitantly, “it fits... a little.”

“The engraved shape’s too short,” Zane said, shaking his head. “The top part’s cut off.”

James peered at the horseshoe as he held it up against the engraved U-shape. “The bottom bit fits perfectly,” he agreed. “It’s almost like the top half of the cornerstone is missing.”

“That makes sense,” Zane said. “None of the buildings are on their original foundations. Every time there’s a new Clutchcudgel tournament winner, the houses swap around. I bet nobody even remembers which house was originally built on this foundation.”

“So if we can figure out which house’s cornerstone shows the *top* half of the horseshoe,” Ralph ventured, “then we’ll know where the entrance to the Nexus Curtain is, right?”

“Maybe,” James said, slipping the horseshoe back into its velvet bag. “But I have a feeling that the only way the dimensional key will work is if we get the right house onto the right foundation.”

Zane shrugged optimistically. “That’s easy! Like Ralph said, we just need to find out which house has the rest of the horseshoe on its cornerstone and then make sure that that house wins the Clutch tourney. If we’re lucky, it’ll be Hermes Mansion. We Zombies are up for a win this year. I can feel it.”

James slumped as a sinking certainty settled over him. He shook his head slowly.

“I don’t think,” he said morosely, “that it’s going to be Hermes Mansion.”



“Wow,” Ralph said a short time later as the three boys stood in the bushes in front of Bigfoot House. “How’d you know?”

“Couldn’t say,” James answered with a sigh. “It just makes a certain kind of backward sense, doesn’t it?”

Zane nodded firmly, his lips pressed into a tight line as he stared down at the cornerstone of Apollo Mansion. Sure enough, the bottom edge of the stone showed the twin markings of the top of the silver horseshoe. “So,” he said heartily, still nodding, “in order to open the Nexus Curtain and potentially prove the innocence of our good friend Petra Morganstern, the *worst* Clutch team in a decade has to win the tournament against the *best* Clutch team in a decade. Is that about it? Do I have this straight?”

“I’m afraid so,” James answered dourly.

Zane nodded some more. “Well, then,” he said, “one thing above all else is absolutely certain.”

“What’s that?” Ralph asked, a little hesitantly.

Zane looked gravely at both James and Ralph and then answered, “You’re gonna need a bigger Gauntlet.”



Over the following weeks, James approached Team Bigfoot's Clutch magic practices with renewed vigor. They did indeed expand the Gauntlet, adding a gyroscopic flight pad section where players could mount a skim and fly in place with simulated wind, turns, and, most important of all, attacking clockwork opponents. Using this, players practiced *Artis Decerto* in flight, learning to perform midair flips, barrel rolls, horizontal leans, and an entirely new maneuver, known as the Drop, in which a player would fall flat onto the length of their skim, their fingers curled over the front edge, reducing their target area and wind resistance, and effectively transforming themselves into missiles. In this posture, the player was able to use his or her skim as a shield, deflecting spells by pulling the leading edge upwards, forcing the spells to bounce off the bottom.

"Wow!" Gobbins cheered as Jazmine performed an impressive dropping barrel roll through a group of clockwork Bullies, complete with mechanical Cudgels. "Way to thread the needle, Jaz!"

"I gotta admit, James," Norrick said, shaking his head, "I wasn't buying into this whole *Artis Decerto* thing at first. But between the new magic we've been practicing and these crazy new moves, I think we might just have a chance to get into the tournament."

"Get into it nothing," Wentworth exclaimed, his eyes boggling behind his huge glasses. "We've got a chance to *win* that baby! Especially now that the Pixies and Igors have been knocked out of the playoffs! It's down to the Werewolves, Vampires, Zombies and us! And we haven't even started using any of these new moves yet!"

"Let's not get too confident," James warned despite his own cautious confidence. "It's one thing to do these maneuvers in the Gauntlet. It's another thing entirely to pull them off on the course. Besides, our next match is sudden death against the Zombies and *they've* been practicing in the Gauntlet same as we have, thanks to the fact that we needed Zane and Professor Cloverhoof's help to build it."

"I watched them practice on it yesterday," Jazmine gasped, jumping off her skim as Ralph halted the Gauntlet around her, "from the window on the upstairs landing. They aren't taking it all that seriously. They didn't use the flight pad at all."

"Graarph," Mukthatch agreed, hopping onto his skim and piloting it into position for his own turn on the pad. "Wurgh raffwabffle."

"What'd he say?" James asked Norrick behind his hand.

“He says the Zombies’ weakness is the fact that they don’t take anything seriously. They prefer tricks and surprise to discipline and practice.”

“Wow,” Ralph said, blinking. “He said all that?”

“Sasquatchian is a very economical language,” Norrick replied, nodding wisely. “I’ve been taking it since grade school. They have a hundred words for dirt, but no word for quit. Kind of tells you everything you need to know about ’em, doesn’t it?”

James nodded.

Later, on the night before the Bigfoots’ last match against Team Zombie, James met Zane on the porch of Hermes Mansion.

“Did you try to talk to them about it?” he asked the blonde boy, who shook his head grimly.

“It’s a pride thing,” Zane explained in a low voice, glancing back at the house behind him. “Team Zombie hasn’t been beat by the Foots since, like, forever. That tie game you handed them last match was bad enough. And this is a playoff death match! The winner goes on, the loser goes home! I can’t just tell them, ‘Hey fellas, why don’t you throw this thing to the Bigfoots, eh? I can’t tell you why, but it’ll keep some girl you don’t know from being sent to Fort Bedlam and who knows, maybe even save the universe from collapsing in on itself because of some missing thread! Whaddaya say?’ Sorry James, you know I’m on board with you, but there’s no way that Bludger will fly.”

James shook his head in exasperation. “Can you, like, slip a dose of Weasley’s Silly Serum into their morning coffees or something? Or hex some invisible weights onto their skrim?”

Zane looked aghast. “*Sabotage the Zombies?*” he hissed, mortified. “Look, mate, I’m on your side and all, but rule number one of Zombie House is that you never *ever* prank your own house.” Zane stopped and glanced aside thoughtfully. “Well, actually, rule number *one* is to always keep the cellar door locked from the outside so the ghoul doesn’t sneak upstairs at night and have parties with all the other house ghouls. *Boy*, do they make a terrible mess. And do they eat? Sheesh. Last time there wasn’t anything left but a box of dried leech chews and half a jar of El Salsa Grenado. But not pranking your own house is *definitely* rule number *two*. Without a doubt.”

“But...!” James began, but Zane cut him off with a raised hand.

“Sorry, James. I just can’t do it. We Zombies may not have much of a code of ethics, but the few ethics we *do* have, we stick to like glue. Capiche? You guys’ll just have to win it fair and square.”

James sighed deeply and nodded. As he turned to leave, however, Zane tapped him on the shoulder.

“But I’ll be rooting for you guys,” he whispered with a crooked smile. “You can do it. Keep between Warrington and Hurst, eh? I can’t tell you why, but if you do that—stick between those two like beetle butter between two slices of white bread—then you’ll do just fine.” He winked conspiratorially and then turned back to his house, whistling an innocent tune.

The afternoon of the match turned out to be bright and warm, resulting in a very exuberant turnout of spectators. The grandstands were packed to overflowing, crowded with waving banners

and handmade signs. To James' surprise, there seemed to be nearly as many Bigfoot colors and banners as there were Zombie supporters. The two factions jostled amiably on the high rampart bleachers, competing against each other with small displays of firework spells in team colors.

"This is it, team!" Wood hollered as the players huddled around him atop the platform. His voice was nearly lost in the roar of the excited crowd. "I know this is a sudden death match, but don't let that spook you! We've played an amazing season and I am proud of each and every one of you! Do your best, keep it clean, and try to have fun! If we lose, we may be out of the playoffs, but we'll still have a better record than Team Bigfoot has racked up in over ten years! You're all winners in my book, eh? So let's keep our chins up! Ready?"

The team joined in, piling their hands atop Wood's outstretched fist. "*GooOO* FEET!"

As the team assembled along the platform edge, Wentworth moved alongside James, his skim at his side.

"If I didn't know any better," he muttered under his breath, "I'd almost think Wood *expected* us to lose."

James glanced at the boy next to him. Wentworth looked up. "I'm just sayin'," he shrugged.

"Well, *I* expect us to win," James replied. "Remember, just keep an eye on Warrington and Hurst. If they line up..."

"Yeah, yeah," Gobbins agreed grimly from James' other side. "We squeeze in between them like Mother Newt chaperoning a Valentine's dance."

A sharp whistle pierced the air over the figure eight course. Professor Sanuye floated over the center ring in his official's tunic, his whistle protruding from between his teeth.

"Number Six Hippogriff," Jazmine announced, launching from the platform for the warm-up lap. The rest of the team began to stream out behind her, assembling into Hippogriff formation.

"This is it," Norrick called seriously, dropping his skim and preparing to launch from the platform. "Sudden death, everyone! Do or die!"

"Do or die!" the others echoed, as if it were a battle cry. James joined them, feeling a drunken mixture of excitement, apprehension, and secret confidence. "Do or die! Let's go!"

One minute later, Sanuye blew a long note on his whistle. The match began.



Two hours later, Team Bigfoot was gathered in the Kite and Key, jostling raucously around two tables which they had pushed together.

“Victory!” Norrick cried, hoisting his Butterbeer. The rest mimicked his toast, making sure to shout loud enough for the Zombies gathered dourly in booths on the other side of the bar to hear. “Victory!” they cried jubilantly, clanking their mugs and tankards together, slopping their drinks all over the tables between them.

“It was a close one,” Gobbins admitted to James as the cheers broke up into enthusiastic chatter. “I was a little worried at halftime with them up by four points.”

James nodded and shrugged, but the truth was that he knew it had never really been a close match at all. One minute before the halftime whistle had blown, Team Zombie had succeeded in walloping home a string of quick goals, thanks to the combined efforts of Warrington and Hurst, who, despite the Foots’ best efforts, had managed to cluster into a piledrive formation, carrying all three Clutches between them and flanked by the remainder of their team.

James had fumed about his team’s failure to prevent the maneuver, but he also knew that piledrive formation was a once-in-a-match tactic. Team Zombie had been nervous about losing the match even then and had begun to resort to desperation maneuvers. Five minutes into the second half, Team Bigfoot had already regained the lead. Wentworth had replaced Mukthatch on goal, leaving Mukthatch to shadow Warrington for the rest of the game, his ape-like reach and intimidating demeanor easily preventing any repeats of the fabled piledrive maneuver. In the end, using a confident mixture of game magic and *Artis Decerto* aerobatics, Team Bigfoot had soundly defeated the Zombies by a score of eighty-two to sixty.

“We’re going to the tournament!” Norrick cried out exuberantly, and the rest joined in, hooting and hollering, but James was less confident. Even as his fellow teammates cheered, he looked around and saw a table near the fireplace surrounded by the slate grey sweaters and scarves of Werewolf House. Clayton Altaire sat at the head of the table, staring at James with a small crooked smile. As James watched, the older boy raised a hand and pointed discreetly at James. He mimed shooting him and mouthed the word ‘*pow*’. The rest of the Werewolves saw the gesture. They turned and grinned wickedly back at James, their eyes glittering narrowly.

James sighed, the celebration leaking out of his heart. *You may make it to the tournament, you little Squibs*, the Werewolves’ grins seemed to say, *but then you’ll have to face off against us, and we’re a whole different cauldron of newts. We eat Squibs like you for breakfast.*

James looked away, not liking those secretive, confident grins. Instead, he looked toward the Zombies on the other side of the room, gathered truculently around their own tables. Zane sat among them, looking equally morose, and yet when he saw James, he winked and shrugged a little. Like the Werewolves’ grins, Zane’s gesture seemed to speak volumes. *Congratulations, pal*, the little wink seemed to say, *now comes the fun part.*

James rolled his eyes, bemused. Even Zane’s gestures managed to be sarcastic.



During the following days, James, Ralph, and Zane struggled to formulate a plan. Barring any unforeseen disasters, it seemed that the Bigfoots would—amazingly enough—play in the final tournament match. For most of the team, this accomplishment was success enough. James, of course, had a different goal in mind. It was essential that the Bigfoots not only *meet* Team Werewolf in the tournament, but that they defeat them. Only then would Apollo Mansion relocate onto Victory Hill, replacing Ares Mansion and thus completing the dimensional keyhole. But how could it be done?

It would have helped if the Werewolves' record had been even slightly imperfect. Where Team Bigfoot (to no one's greater surprise than their own) had managed to scrape together a record of four wins and three losses, barely clinging to a second-place standing, Team Werewolf was as yet undefeated. Worse yet, all but one of the Bigfoots' victories had been breathtakingly close, including two technical wins by tie. The Werewolves, however, had easily dominated every match, usually leading by double digits at halftime and proceeding to send in their second-string players for the last quarter while the starters actually left the platform, descending to their locker cellar and changing out of their pads and jerseys. The sheer arrogance of it all added insult to injury and formed the final sting of the Werewolves' game of psychological warfare—a game they alone played with nearly eerie ease.

"*Every* team has a weakness," Zane insisted, pounding the arm of one of the sofas in the Bigfoot game room. "Even the Wolves."

"Probably, but nobody's found it yet," Ralph said with a sigh. "They just seem to play a totally solid game. No chinks, no weak links."

James shook his head as he looked down at the floor between the sofas. The disarmadillo waddled idly past a nearby coffee table, sniffing the carpet, two empty licorice soda bottles balanced amusingly on its plated back. Zane sat up and added his own empty bottle to the collection.

"That doesn't mean they don't *have* a weakness," he said darkly. "It just means they're hiding it behind all that stupid arrogance. Their best offense is psyching everyone out so much that they win even before the match starts."

"Maybe," James admitted. "But then again, maybe *that's* their weakness. Maybe they really aren't as good a team as everyone *believes* they are. Maybe Altaire and his goons have just succeeded

in convincing everyone that the Werewolves are so good that the other teams just get nervous and throw the game. Has that ever occurred to you?”

Zane considered it. “It’s a theory, at least,” he acknowledged. “So you’re saying that if you can convince the Foots that Team Werewolf is more bark than bite, then maybe you’ll take the Wolves’ best weapon right out of their paws?”

“Couldn’t hurt,” Ralph nodded. “Either way, right? I mean, psyching-out can work both ways. If it’s true that Team Werewolf can psyche other teams into playing worse, then it’s also true that we can psyche *ourselves* into playing even *better*. Stands to reason.”

Zane pressed his lips together thoughtfully. “But you’ll need more than words to convince your guys that the Werewolves are just a bunch of sheep in wolves’ clothing. You’ll need something concrete, something they can rally around. Some secret weapon or something, even if it’s just a symbol.”

“Like that stupid bronze statue that Team Werewolf rubs on their way to every match,” Ralph concurred, becoming excited. “But different. Something that will really make the team believe they have an ace up their sleeve.”

James was thoughtful, his eyes narrowed as the disarmadillo lumbered under his outstretched legs, knocking the bottles from its back. Zane and Ralph looked at him.

“What are you thinking?” Zane asked, raising his eyebrows.

James mused, “I’m thinking that maybe the Werewolves *do* have a weakness after all. I mean, besides their overconfidence.”

“What’s that?” Ralph asked.

James smiled slowly and a little wickedly. “Do you think that there is *anyone* on campus, apart from their own housemates, who *want* Team Werewolf to win the tournament?”

Zane blew a breath out through pursed lips. “After a decade of being undefeated? And after all the humiliations they’ve handed out for the last few seasons? Not likely. In fact, I’d bet that everyone in every other house would pay good money to see the Wolves get clobbered this year. Why?”

James was still smiling mischievously. “Do you think,” he asked quietly, “that they’d be willing to help make it happen?”



It was a simple enough plan, and James admitted, somewhat grudgingly, that he was just the person to pull it off.

Two years earlier, during his first term at Hogwarts, James had learned something about himself. He was not like his father. This was not a bad thing, really (although for some time he had sorely believed it was). It did mean, however, that James had to find other methods to get things done. His father, as a young man, had succeeded by rushing pell-mell straight into the arms of danger, usually flanked only by his mates, Ron and Hermione. This had worked for him because he was, simply put, the child of destiny. He was Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.

James, on the other hand, was just a kid. His attempts to manage adventures entirely on his own had failed rather miserably. Like Team Bigfoot, James had only succeeded narrowly, often by the slightest of margins, and always with the help of the people around him. This had finally convinced him of the reality of the kind of person he was. Rather than attempting to manage things entirely on his own as his father had, James had learned (at least in a few instances) to ask for help.

He had first done this by asking the Gremlins to assist him, Ralph, and Zane in the great broomstick caper, when they had believed that Tabitha Corsica's broom had been the legendary Merlin staff in disguise. The caper had failed (in the fundamental sense that the broomstick had not, in fact, been the Merlin staff), but it had worked excellently in actual practice; James had succeeded in pilfering the broom, at least for a few minutes. Later, of course, James had asked Merlin himself to help them in ridding Hogwarts of the pesky (but dangerous) Muggle reporter, Martin Prescott. That, incredibly, had worked exceptionally well. Grudgingly, over the next year, James had learned that this was his fate. He was not a hero so much as he was a manager. He asked for help. Not always, of course, and probably not even as often as he should, but when he did, things seemed to work out much better.

Now, he was only slightly more comfortable with it. And yet, as he visited the first house on his list (it was Aphrodite Heights, up on the hill near the theater), he discovered that this task, unlike his previous experiences with asking for help, was going to be rather eerily easy.

"You bet," Ophelia Wright, captain of Team Pixie, nodded resolutely, making her blonde pigtails flop. "Those Werewolf stump-heads had the gall to play Winkles and Augers on their platform during our last match. By the fourth quarter, Professor Jackson wasn't even watching the game! He was watching his own players winkle an old Clutch around their platform! We'll do more than share our best spells with you. We'll show you how to use them! *That'll* teach those tasteless old Wolves to embarrass the Pixies."

Ten minutes later, James left Aphrodite Heights in a sort of stunned daze. Ralph walked next to him, his nose buried in a handwritten notebook, its pages crammed with hand-drawn illustrations and neat, back-slanting cursive, the 'i's all dotted with smiley faces and hearts.

"Wow," Ralph breathed, not looking up from the pages. "Those Pixies are only cute on the outside. This stuff is *ruthless*."

James nodded, but their work wasn't done yet. They still had three more houses to visit, and yet he approached the task with a renewed sense of purpose. Ophelia Wright had responded almost as if the two Bigfoot players were doing *them* a favor, rather than the other way around.

"Put them in their place," she'd said grimly as she walked them to the big gingerbread front door of Aphrodite Heights. "Knock them off their infuriatingly colorless grey skrimps and tell them it's from Team Pixie, at least in part."

James had nodded, smiling crookedly. This was going far better than he'd expected.

By the end of the day, he and Ralph had procured the enthusiastic assistance of the team captains from every other house.

The Igors had agreed to give Team Bigfoot's skrimps a secret pre-game boost, using a battery of technomantic enhancements that they had formulated over the previous few seasons and which had, up until now, been a carefully guarded secret. These enhancements, the Igor captain promised with a slightly maniacal (if practiced) laugh, would make the Bigfoots' skrimps faster and more maneuverable than anything in the Werewolves' arsenal.

Warrington, the captain of Team Zombie, was still smarting from his team's loss to the Bigfoots, but with Zane's encouragement, this was easily offset by the Zombies long-term hatred of the Werewolves. He agreed to share his team's most effective offensive techniques with the Bigfoots, which was no small offering, considering that the Zombies had succeeded in scoring the most points against the Werewolves throughout the season.

James had been prepared to fetch Wentworth in order to guarantee an interview with the captain of Team Vampire, but it turned out that the captain was Anton Harding, the boy who had initially tried to prevent their entrance into Erebus Castle, and he had already heard about James and Ralph's mission. He headed them off as they made their way across the afternoon warmth of the campus.

"I hear you're looking for help from the other societies in beating Altaire and his Werewolves in the tournament," he said with no preamble.

James nodded and gulped. "Er, yes," he admitted. "We checked the Bigfoot team charter and saw that there's no rule against it. We just thought the other teams might, er, want to see the Werewolves finally get beaten after all these years. Fair and square, of course. Nothing underhanded."

Harding's eyes narrowed. "Well, *that's* a shame," he scowled in disgust. "But I should have known that Team Bigfoot wouldn't have the guts to do anything *truly* evil to put those infuriating dogs in their place. I was willing to share with you our most secret game curses. Would you be willing to accept a few mild Plague Hexes at least?"

Ralph gave a smile that shocked James a little and then put an arm around Harding's shoulders. "Did you know," he said conspiratorially, "that I come from a little place known as Slytherin House? Plague Hexes are a bit of a specialty for us. Talk to me."

Harding met Ralph's grin. For the next twenty minutes, the three talked in low voices, hovering near the glinting orb of the Octosphere. At the end of it, both Ralph and Harding laughed. After a moment, James joined in, a bit nervously.

All the houses were backing them now. With their assistance, Team Bigfoot would be more formidable than they had ever been before and might never be again. James knew, however, that the real secret of their potential success was not in the technomancy-enhanced skrimms or the expanded game magic or even the Vampires' dreadful game curses. The real secret was in the psychological boost that these things would give Team Bigfoot. The whole school was behind them, rooting for them, and offering them their best support. Apart from the members of Werewolf House, the entire school believed that the Bigfoots could win the tournament.

This, more than anything, was their secret weapon. Tentatively, James began to think that they might just pull it off.

Therefore completes chapter nineteen. Only a few chapters left!

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.