



## 21. UNLIKELY ALLIANCES

“*Petra!*” James called, not even feeling Ralph and Zane’s hands on his shoulders, holding him back. Distantly, he was aware that he had produced his wand from his robes, was raising it as if he meant to attack Albert Keynes and his troop of court officials. It was preposterous, of course, but for the moment, he was beyond such practicalities. They had taken her, had Stunned her unconscious like some sort of wild animal, and were dragging her away for imprisonment.

The doors of the Medical College swung slowly shut, cutting off the view of the pathetically hovering young woman and her cadre of guards. Keynes watched James through the gently closing doors, his expression sadly patronizing. *Did you really think I wouldn’t learn the truth?* His gaze seemed to say. And then, with a soft click, the doors closed.

“No,” James groaned. “It’s not supposed to happen this way. They weren’t supposed to convict her yet! We’re so *close!*”

“It’s not over yet,” Zane said quietly, seriously, finally releasing James’ shoulder. “We can still set things to rights.”

Ralph nodded. “Yeah, it isn’t over yet.”

James barely heard them, however. He could feel the invisible silver thread that connected him to Petra. It was cold, flowing down the center of his arm like a vein of ice, filling his head with murky visions and shreds of dreams, broadcast directly from Petra’s sleeping mind. She was

dreaming of her capture, replaying it over and over. James caught phantom glimpses of his own parents on the street outside their flat, helpless and angry. Lily was there, standing on the footpath next to Izzy. They were holding hands. Both of them looked shocked, disbelieving. In the center of the street, Keynes and his crew called Petra out, surrounding her, raising their wands toward her. He heard Petra's own voice in her memory, confused and dismayed, claiming that she would come quietly, that it was all a mistake...

*It isn't a mistake,* Keynes had said blandly, his own wand trained unflinchingly on her. *And you certainly will come quietly.*

There were flashes then, coming from many directions at once. Petra had tried to fight their force, but she hadn't been prepared. It was too sudden, and there'd been too many of them. Blackness had overtaken her then, and in her unconscious mind, the scene began to play over again, like a needle skipping on an old record.

Anger swelled in James' chest, overwhelming him. Before he knew it, he was running, darting toward the Medical Center, his wand still in his hand, gripped hard enough to emit red sparks from its tip. He heard Zane and Ralph call out to him again followed by the alarmed cries of both Albus and Lucy, but those things didn't matter. He followed the invisible silvery thread, chasing it like a beacon.

He burst through the doors of the Medical College and bolted through the lobby, his footsteps echoing loudly on the marble floor. He made it only a few paces before a burst of light startled him. His wand sprang from his hand and clattered to the floor, spinning off into the hall.

"Leave it," a voice commanded quickly, even as James scrambled after it. James stopped and spun around, panting. Albert Keynes was standing in a corner just inside the main doors, his own wand raised comfortably, as if he had merely been waiting for James.

"Good choice," Keynes said, unsmiling. "I don't blame you for being upset, young man, but I would hate to see you do anything rash. You really must learn to control your emotions."

"She's not guilty!" James said, almost shouting in rage and frustration. "You *must* know that!"

Keynes cocked his head pityingly. "I'd advise you to leave now, Mr. Potter. I will turn your wand over to the Chancellor, from whom you may collect it at a later time, once you have calmed yourself."

"She didn't do it!" James repeated, advancing on Keynes, his hands opening and closing at his sides, helplessly empty.

"Ms. Morganstern is guilty, Mr. Potter," Keynes said calmly, his voice almost infuriatingly bland and quiet. "I have exhausted every possibility of her innocence. It is my job. Justice must be served."

"Who'd you talk to?" James demanded, shaking his head in fury. "Whoever they are, they lied!"

Keynes raised his chin slightly, his pale face growing stony. “Beware what questions you ask, my young friend,” he said coolly. “You may get answers you do not wish to hear.”

“You don’t know anything!” James spat, stopping in the center of the foyer. Tears of frustration pricked the corners of his eyes, but he willed them back. “You *can’t* know anything. Whatever you’ve heard, it’s all lies!”

“I fear,” Keynes said, his voice so low and quiet that James had to strain to hear him, “that it is *you* who have been lied to, Mr. Potter. Lied to by Ms. Morganstern herself.”

James’ face heated in an angry blush, almost as if he knew that Keynes was right. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, dropping his own voice.

“I *know* what happened at Morganstern Farm,” Keynes said slowly, his eyes boring into James. “Do you?”

“I know enough,” James said, his cheeks still burning. “I know that she escaped from an awful life with her stepmother. Her sister too.”

Keynes was shaking his head gravely. “You know what Ms. Morganstern wishes you to know. But she has kept the worst of it from you.”

“And what’s the worst of it--” James demanded, but Keynes was answering already, interrupting him, his words calculated to cut like a razor.

“Ms. Morganstern *killed* her stepmother,” Keynes said carefully, making certain that James heard every word. James stared at him dumbly, and Keynes went on, drawing a sad little sigh. “She was a Muggle woman, powerless and helpless to fight back against such ferocity. Ms. Morganstern killed the woman using magic that was both stunning and inexplicable. She used a tree to do it. It sounds rather incredible, doesn’t it? Apparently, Ms. Morganstern brought the tree to life, forced it to collect her stepmother, and then commanded it to drown her in a nearby lake. Worse, she did it within sight of the woman’s own daughter, Izabella Morganstern. I scarcely believed it myself, but the evidence of the scene of the crime corroborates the story quite convincingly. The crater where the tree once stood is still there. And, of course, the witness is *very* persuasive.”

When James tried to speak, his voice came out in a dry croak. “*What* witness?”

Keynes pressed his lips together thoughtfully, and James assumed he wouldn’t answer, but then Keynes met his gaze again. “A witch,” he replied very quietly. “You couldn’t possibly know her. She lived in the area at the time, and was given to morning walks around the lake in question. She is a lover of nature, you see, and water in particular. She strove to remain hidden during her morning strolls out of fear of being arrested for trespassing since the lake was a part of Morganstern Farm. Still, her conscience bade her to tell me what she witnessed. She sought me out, in fact. Had it not been for her, and for the veracity of her story, Ms. Morganstern might well have gotten away with the murder she committed that morning. And as you can imagine, this charge only further convinced me of the truth of Mr. Henredon’s allegations about what happened in the Hall of Archives. Why, without this woman’s noble testimony, Ms. Morganstern *might* have gone scot-free.”

James felt rooted to the floor, cold and solid as a statue. “Who was she?” he asked, again not expecting an answer, and yet fearing that he knew the answer nonetheless. Of course he did. He could picture her even now in his memory; long red hair, mostly hidden beneath a dark hood, glittering green eyes, unnaturally perfect, pale skin. *People tend not to notice me*, she had said on the night James first met her in the halls of the Aquapolis. *Unless they want to. Or unless I make them.*

“You do not know her,” Keynes said, smiling condescendingly at James. “She is rather a secretive woman, perhaps even reclusive, although quite fetching, in her own way.”

“She didn’t even give you her name, did she?” James whispered, shaking his head. “She was that ‘secretive’, wasn’t she? She was lying to you. She *had* to be.”

“She was not lying,” Keynes stated coldly, his eyes narrowing. “And she most certainly did give me her name, Mr. Potter. *Not* that it should matter to you. Her name...” He stopped, apparently considering whether he should go on. Finally he lowered his voice to a near mutter and went on. “Her first name is *Judith*. That’s all you need to know. Now begone. Quickly, before I grow impatient.”

James stood on the spot, however, his eyes wide, his brow knitted in consternation. *Judith*. He’d heard that name before. But where? His thoughts races as he tried to place it.

“Go!” Keynes commanded, flicking his wand again. James stumbled backwards as a mild force shoved him, buffeting him like a hot wind. He turned, ignoring Keynes’ earlier instructions, and scooped up his wand from the floor. A moment later, he burst out into the warm air of the summer evening. Zane, Ralph and Lucy were waiting for him, wide-eyed and worried. James shook his head at them and headed across the campus, making his way to Apollo Mansion.

“What happened?” Zane demanded, trotting to catch up. “Did you see her?”

“No,” James answered, walking fast, his mind spinning. “You lot go on up to the library. I... er, need to grab a few more books. I’ll meet you there in a few minutes. We can talk about it then.”

Ralph, Zane and Lucy agreed, albeit reluctantly.

James didn’t really need any of his books, however. What he really needed was a few minutes to think. It was awfully difficult. Keynes words clanged like lead weights in James’ memory, blotting out his own thoughts. Was any of it true? Did it change anything? Was it too late to help Petra now? Did Petra truly *deserve* his help? There were so many questions, and so few answers. James stalked along in a sort of numb fugue, barely seeing the campus as it unrolled around him. He was on the footpath that led up to Apollo Mansion when he finally, unexpectedly, remembered where he’d heard the name Judith before. He stopped, his brow furrowed, perplexed.

*Judith* had been the name of Merlin’s betrothed love, back in the distant past, a thousand years earlier. James remembered Rose telling him all about it last year. Merlin had never married Judith, of course, due to a series of tragic events that had ended, finally, with her death at Merlin’s own unknowing hand. Could there be some sort of connection?

James thought of the woman he had met in the corridors of the Aquapolis, and then later seen on the *Zephyr*, and then, later still, witnessed coming out of the Hall of Archives on the night of the attack, apparently in the company of Petra. Could she really be the same woman that had sought out Keynes and told him the terrible tale of what had happened at Morganstern Farm? Why would she do such a thing? How could she have known? Worse, was her testimony true? Had Petra truly killed her stepmother? And finally, somehow most nagging of all, was there some strange connection between this mysterious woman and the Judith of Merlin's tragic past?

It was impossible, of course. And yet James couldn't shake the suspicion. It buzzed around his head like a cloud of gnats, persistent and teasing. After all, it wasn't a particularly common name, Judith.

And then, out of nowhere, James remembered one more thing that Rose had told him: like the Morgansterns, Merlin's Judith had had a lake on her farm. In fact, it had formed the source of her nickname amongst the local villagers.

*"Judith,"* James whispered to himself, musing. "The Lady of the Lake."

At the sound of his own words, a shiver coursed down James' back. Despite the evening's early summer warmth, it shook him all the way to his toes.



The final days of the school year began to run past quickly, draining away like grains of sand in a giant hourglass. Older students were most often seen buried in their books or studying in tense knots all over the campus. Final exams filled the last week's schedule, looming like vultures. James was amazed that the year had gone by so quickly. As he walked to classes, he occasionally glanced back at the Warping Willow, positioned near the southwest corner of the mall in the shadow of the guest house, and reminded himself that he would soon be using it to go back home for good. He was glad of this, and yet it all seemed so far away and remote--the Potter family home in Marble Arch, Kreacher, even Hogwarts, although he had seen the Gryffindor common room many times throughout the school year via the Shard.

Sometimes it seemed to James that it had only been a few days since his arrival at Alma Aleron. He remembered his first nights on campus, sleeping in the common dorm with its creepy clockwork monkey bellhop. He recalled (with a pang of embarrassment) the debacle of the Great Flag Switch escapade, which had destroyed his and Ralph's chances of joining Zombie House. Patches the cat had warned them about pledging at Zombie House, and he had apparently been right. The cat had suggested that they rush for Igor House. In retrospect, maybe he'd been onto something. James was fairly good at Technomancy despite his hesitance to admit it. Kneazle or not, Patches apparently knew stuff.

As the final week's exams wore on, a hard summer heat wave descended over the school, raising heat shimmers from the footpaths and making the new leaves hang limp from their branches, as if exhausted. Students loosened their ties and carried their blazers disconsolately under their arms or over their shoulders. Old-fashioned magical fans were placed in many of the buildings' entryways, their fat blades humming loudly, pushing the hot air around the halls and rustling the papers tacked to the bulletin boards. Students clustered in front of these fans, holding lackluster conversations or studying sheets of last-minute notes, furiously cramming for their impending exams.

Despite James' distractions, he felt confident that he was doing fairly well with his end-of-term exams. Through the Shard, Rose had offered, albeit tiredly, to help him, Ralph, and Zane to study since the Hogwarts school term lasted a bit longer than Alma Aleron's.

"I *would* ask you to return the favor in the next few weeks," she'd said, rolling her eyes. "But I expect that'd be a bit like asking for blood from a rock."

"Is that likely to be on the exam?" Ralph had asked suddenly, looking up from his bed, where he'd been poring over his Advanced Elemental Transmutation textbook. "We did butterflies from stones already. I don't remember blood from a rock." He flipped some pages while Rose sighed helplessly.

After studying late Thursday afternoon, James explained everything to Rose. Scorpius was not present, thankfully, otherwise he might not have.

"So what are you going to do?" Rose asked seriously, now standing next to the mantel in the Gryffindor common room so they could all keep their voices low. "I mean, if she's guilty, she's guilty. You can't stand in the way of justice."

James sighed deeply. He asked his cousin, "Do *you* really believe she's guilty?"

Rose shrugged, as if the question was too big to answer. "I don't know," she replied somberly. "Scorpius thinks she did it. So do Damien and Sabrina. I mean, we all *like* Petra and all, but it doesn't look very good, does it? That Arbiter bloke spoke to them, you know, and Ted too. Via Floo. He found out that they were all there when everything, er, *came down* at Petra's grandparents' farm. They told him to go hex himself, in so many words, but he already seemed to know everything. I hid behind the couch during the interview. He was one smug beast, I'll tell you."

"You got that one right," Zane commented from James' bed, where he lounged amidst a pile of books and notes. "Nobody should enjoy 'justice' as much as he does. He's just a bully with a badge if you ask me."

“So what do they plan to do with Petra?” Rose asked in a hushed voice.

Zane shrugged briskly. “She’s still in the Medical College detention wing, only a few doors down from old Madame Delacroix, I hear. Lucy volunteers there sometimes, so she’s been keeping us in the loop. Hardly anybody is allowed within fifty feet of Petra’s door. They have guards posted all over the place, even though Petra’s been unconscious the whole time. They gave her the poison apple treatment.”

“Poison apple?” Rose blinked, frowning. “Is that a joke?”

“Nope,” Zane said seriously. “Mother Newt makes ’em. One bite and you’re out for good, or at least until someone says the magic word to wake you up. They had to give it to Petra by hand since she was already out cold when they brought her in. Until they know how to move her and lock her up, that’s where she’ll stay, sleeping under its spell. She may be powerful, but *nobody* wakes up from the poison apple on their own.”

“What about Izzy?” Rose pressed. “Can’t Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny just adopt her? Why’s the court say she has to be Obliviated?”

“It’s the law,” James said darkly. “Izzy’s a Muggle, remember? As long as she had a free and living magical relative, she’d have been allowed to live in the wizarding world. But now Petra’s been convicted of a crime, so Izzy is on her own. If she was of age it would be a different story, but since she’s not, the law says that she has to be sent back to the Muggle world.”

“That’s horrible,” Rose said, hugging herself. Then, in a different voice, she asked, “Do you still plan to go through with your plans regarding the World Between the Worlds?”

James nodded. “Yes,” he said stubbornly. “*If* we can win the tournament next Monday. *And* if we really can open the Nexus Curtain, once Apollo Mansion moves to Victory Hill and the cornerstones come together.”

Rose shook her head slowly, watching her cousin’s face through the glass of the Shard. “Are you really sure that’s such a good idea? What if you do find your way into this place--this World Between the Worlds--only to find out that Petra really *did* do it?”

James’ face hardened slightly. “If it really was Petra, then she was being tricked or used somehow. We’ll prove it.”

Rose was persistent. “But how can you *know* that?” she asked earnestly, almost whispering.

“Because of the silver thread,” he answered, meeting her eyes. After a moment, he glanced around at Zane and Ralph. “You remember what I told you lot about that? From when Petra went over the back of the *Gwyndemere* and nearly fell into the ocean?”

Ralph nodded, remembering. “Yeah, you said that this magical silver thread appeared and connected the two of you. It’s what saved her.”

“Yeah,” James concurred gravely. “Well, my dad talked to me about it afterwards. I don’t remember everything he said, but I *do* remember this: he said that what happened between me and Petra was sort of like what happened between him and his mum, when she was willing to die for

him. It created some really deep kind of magic, protecting him, but also connecting him to Voldemort. When Petra fell off the ship..." He paused, searching for the words. After a moment, he drew a deep breath. "I was... willing to do whatever I had to do to save her. I was even willing to go over in her place although I was barely thinking about it at the time. It all happened too fast to think. Dad says that because I was willing to trade fates with Petra, it made that deep magic happen, just like it did between his mum and him. Only... different."

"Because you *didn't* die," Rose said, nodding slightly. "And yet, you saved her anyway. Somehow."

"That changes the deal, though, doesn't it?" Ralph suggested. "I mean, it's a little like cheating, er, isn't it?"

James looked at his friend. "Maybe it is. I don't know. The magic was so strong, so... unreal. But the thing is, where the deep magic connected my dad to Voldemort, back when he was a baby and his mum died for him, for me and Petra, it happened differently. It connected us, somehow. That silver thread, the one that appeared and saved her, connecting us so that I could pull her up... it's still there. When I'm close to her... and sometimes even when I'm not... I can sense her on the other end of it. I can, sort of, feel echoes of her thoughts and dreams. It isn't like I can read her mind or anything. But I can feel the shape of her thoughts. And probably vice versa too. One thing I know for sure is that regardless of what Keynes and the rest all say, Petra believes she is innocent. She is really and truly convinced that she didn't break into the Hall of Archives *or* curse Mr. Henredon. In her mind, she's totally innocent." He paused, and frowned thoughtfully. "At least, she believes she's innocent of that."

Rose looked very serious on the other side of the Shard. Her brow was low, knitted on her forehead. "James," she said softly. "I'm afraid to say this, but... that's a little crazy."

James blinked at her. "Well," he countered defensively, "maybe. But it's true!"

"Silver thread or not," Zane announced, climbing to his feet. "I just want to see how this whole dealio works out. We've put too much into this to stop now."

"That's hardly a good reason," Rose said, but Zane approached the Shard and patted it, as if he meant to pat her on the head.

"Rose, love, you're a girl. You wouldn't understand. There's a sort of inertia to these things. We got the magic horseshoe. We figured out the riddle of where the Nexus Curtain is. There's no *way* we can stop now. The weight of our own curiosity would crush us. Is that what you want? For us to be crushed by our own curiosity?"

"This is *dangerous*," Rose insisted, her eyes hardening. "At *least* tell your father, James."

James shook his head. "Dad's completely swamped," he replied. "Ever since Petra's arrest, he's been buried in some major secret plan. Titus Hardcastle came over for it, and even Viktor Krum and the Harriers. Dad doesn't trust the locals much, and they don't trust him, so he thought it'd be best to bring his own blokes along for this last raid, whatever it is. There's no way I'm going to throw this on him as well."



“Is it the W.U.L.F.?” Rose asked, interested in spite of herself. “Has Uncle Harry found them? And that missing Muggle politician?”

James shook his head and shrugged. “All I know for sure is that it’s all going to go down in the next few days. Dad can’t even come to my Clutchcudgel tournament. He and Titus Hardcastle are going to be in New Amsterdam, ‘doing some last minute reconnaissance’ is what he told me. There’s going to be a big Muggle parade that night--it’s some American holiday or other.”

“Memorial Day,” Zane piped up, nodding.

“Yeah, that,” James agreed. “Dad says it’ll be the perfect time to make last-minute arrangements since everybody will be distracted with the parade and all the festivities. Last time he tried to raid them, the bad guys caught wind of it somehow, and got away only hours before. Dad doesn’t want that to happen this time.”

Rose sighed. “Well,” she admitted, “I do feel a bit better knowing that this could all be over soon. You’ll be coming home after this is all said and done? Assuming Uncle Harry’s raid goes well?”

“Oh, it’ll be a smash,” Zane nodded confidently. “I mean, he’s Harry Potter, right? The Boy Who Lived! And he’s got his A-team with him! Hardcastle, Krum, everybody! Those W.U.L.F. loons and their crazy new lady leader will be breaking rocks in Fort Bedlam by this time next week. You wait and see.”

Rose accepted this stolidly. “Well, then. Sorry your dad won’t be there to see you play in your tournament, James,” she said a little stiffly. “And I do wish you well, no matter what.”

James shrugged, as if he didn’t really mind that his dad wouldn’t be there, which he did. “It’s all right,” he said. “Mum says that Viktor Krum might come along with her since Dad doesn’t really need him for his little lookie-loo around New Amsterdam that day. Besides, Lily will be there too along with Izzy, Uncle Percy and everybody else. That’ll be pretty cool. I mean, how many players get to have a former professional Quidditch player and Triwizard Tournament contestant supporting them from the stands?”

“Not many, I’d guess,” Rose admitted. “Strange that your dad doesn’t want Viktor to come along for his reconnaissance mission since he came all that way to help out. But anyway, no matter how it all turns out, *promise* me, all three of you, that you’ll be careful.”

“We’ll be careful,” Zane said soothingly. “We’ll watch out for each other, Rosy. I won’t let anything happen to your cousin.”

Rose sighed harshly and shook her head. “I’m less worried about the three of *you*,” she said grimly, “than I am the universe in general.”



When the day of the Clutchcudgel tournament match finally came around, the school was universally abuzz with excitement and anticipation. The irony of the decade's worst team facing off against the long-time champions was not in the least lost on the student body at large. Banners had appeared on the balconies of several of the mansions and rowhouses, proclaiming support for Team Bigfoot in the face of their daunting adversary. "STOMP THE WOLVES!" the poster on Hermes Mansion declared in bright green letters, accompanied by a messily painted (and animated) drawing of a gigantic foot mashing a werewolf's whimpering head. All over the campus, the members of Team Bigfoot were greeted with encouraging cheers and backslaps, reducing the players to sheepish, happy grins.

James made his way through the day's last exam--Clockwork Mechanics, with Professor Cloverhoof--in a state of nervous euphoria. On one hand, he harbored a secret confidence that Team Bigfoot might actually succeed in winning the tournament, with the help of the other four houses, whose grudges against Team Werewolf had made them exceedingly eager to assist in whatever way they could. On the other hand, James was painfully aware that if they lost, there was much more at stake than mere house pride and a place on Victory Hill.

"Good luck tonight, Mr. Potter," Professor Cloverhoof commented as he examined James' Clockwork test assignment, a magic-powered owl feeder. "Thoroughly prepared, are you?"

James nodded. "As prepared as we'll ever be, I think."

"I am given to understand that my own students have taught your team a few of our better tactics," Cloverhoof said, tipping a handful of birdseed into the tiny clockwork hopper. The machine's brass gears began to turn and click industriously. "I trust that you will keep such things to yourselves, hmm?"

James nodded again, more quickly. "Absolutely, sir!"

"Excellent," the professor grinned. "But for tonight, young man..." here, Cloverhoof leaned over the desk slightly, his grin turning predatory, "use them well, and send those wolves to the doghouse. With our blessing."

"Will do, sir!" James agreed, taking a step back from the professor's mirthless grin. Tiny chugs and ratchetings sounded from the Clockwork owl feeder. After a moment, it deposited a small supply of seed into a copper dish and let out a happy little *ding*.

"Excellent work, Mr. Potter," Cloverhoof said breezily, leaning back at his desk. "On *all* counts."

As James made his way out into the heat of the campus, heading for a late lunch at Apollo Mansion, he thought on what Cloverhoof had said. The truth of it was that he was just a bit nervous about some of what the other houses had offered by way of assistance. Much of it, like the Zombies' Clutch spells, struck James as rather experimental and risky--the sort of things that the teams might have considered throughout the season, but never quite had the guts (or the audacity) to try themselves. The Igors, for instance, had installed tiny clockwork gizmos on the backs of some of Team Bigfoot's skrimers. James knew what they did--they had even partly been his idea, although he hadn't been entirely serious about it--and yet he was worried that they weren't technically legal. Perhaps even worse, Team Vampire had offered the Foots the use of some rather dastardly curses and airborne potions.

"Entirely sporting," the Vampire magic coach, a boy named Ellis Alekzander had insisted seriously. His narrowed eyes and tight smile had seemed to say just the opposite, however. "I've packaged them in convenient little pouches. Your team can wear one each around their neck. When the right time comes, simply pull the ripcord attached to the top here. The wind will do the rest."

Norrick had been especially pleased by the Vampires' 'game cursology' tactics.

"Lesson twelve in the Werewolves' own handbook," he declared, holding up the tiny pouch. "All's fair in love and war'. Right back at'cha, fellas!"

Still, despite James' worries about the dubious nature of some of the other teams' suggested tactics, his overall plan seemed to have worked even better than he could have hoped. The members of Team Bigfoot, from Jazmine Jade to Mukthatch, seemed thoroughly convinced that they could win the tournament and unseat the reigning Werewolf champions. They'd even begun talking about what life would be like on Victory Hill.

"I hear that Apollo Mansion hasn't been on the Hill for over a hundred years!" a senior Bigfoot boy named Troy Covington said when James met the team in the kitchen for lunch. "Yeats told me. He was here back then, making grilled cheese sandwiches with pickles, just like today."

"We'll have to move all the game room stuff ourselves, after the mansions swap places," Wentworth commented through a mouthful of sandwich. "The cellars don't move, of course, and we sure don't want to let those Werewolf goons have our ping pong table."

"Or the disarmadillo," Jazmine added. "*OR*, Heckle and Jeckle."

"Wraagh Arbphle!" Mukthatch concurred, nodding.

Norrick frowned. "That's right. That fridge is dead heavy. We'll have to levitate it."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," James interrupted, raising his hands. "Let's just concentrate on winning tonight, eh? The rest will take care of itself."

As James finished his lunch and prepared to head off to his last class, he met Professor Wood in the hallway.

"James," Wood said, and James could tell by his tone of voice that the professor had been looking for him. "Come with me down to my office for a moment, would you? I want to talk to you about something."

James gulped. “Er, sure, Professor,” he replied, and followed Wood toward the stairs.

Wood didn’t speak until he was seated at his desk in the corner of the mid-day-empty game-room. James settled into one of the old reclining easy chairs across from the professor’s crooked desk. He sank deep into its sprung seat, but didn’t lean back. Heckle and Jeckle hung on either side of the nearby refrigerator, apparently asleep. The disarmadillo had managed to climb onto the corner of Wood’s desk, where it lay curled in a sort of armored ball, its narrow nose on its forepaws. James waited for Wood to begin. After a thoughtful pause, the professor drew a breath and peered up at the low ceiling.

“The Bigfoot Clutchcudgel team has done remarkably well this season, hasn’t it?” he asked with forced casualness.

James nodded. “Yes sir.”

“*Unusually* well, many would say,” Wood went on, still looking up at the ceiling, his hands folded on his chest. He shook his head slowly, musingly, and then lowered his gaze to the boy across from him. With a small smile, he said, “You know, James, I’ve been President of Apollo Mansion for several years. I took it over from the previous Bigfoot President, Maxwell Greenfield, when I became a full professor and he decided to retire. I remember it like it was yesterday. Chancellor Franklyn called me to his office, and Greenfield was there when I arrived. Together, they told me about the history of Bigfoot House, about how, despite what many believed, it was the real backbone of the entire school. Bigfoot House, they said, is Alma Aleron’s true melting pot. Back then, you see, Apollo Mansion was home to two Arctic Sasquatches, a she-werewolf, a half-goblin, two American Indian shamans from Shackamaxon, and an Atlantean merman who had to sleep in a giant tub and wear a water helmet to classes. As you now know, Bigfoot House enjoys the same diversity today as it did then, not as a slogan or a gimmick, but as a basic fact of life. Just as Franklyn told me on that day, years ago, we, the Bigfoots, represent the true American ideal.”

James nodded again, not quite sure what any of this had to do with the Bigfoot Clutch team. “Sure, Professor. I mean, we’ve got Jazmine, who’s part-Veela, although she hardly ever acts like it. And Mukthatch, and Went, whose a... er...”

“It’s all right,” Wood said, smiling a bit more easily. “I know about Mr. Paddington. Wentworth’s parents made arrangements with the school administration to keep his, er, *heritage* a secret. They themselves are part of the Crimson Teetotalers League. That means they’ve trained themselves not to require blood at all. Extremely dedicated to their new lives they are, which is why they felt it was important for Wentworth to receive a normal magical education. One would think that he would have ended up in Vampire House, of course, but as you might imagine, Apollo Mansion is a much better fit for him.”

James nodded meaningfully. “Yeah, we spent some time in Vampire House. They think *real* vampires have to be like the ones in Remora’s stupid books--all unbelievably good-looking and tragically romantic and rubbish like that.”

“In all fairness,” Wood said, as if he felt it was his duty. “Some vampires *are* like that.” Here, he paused and bobbed his head thoughtfully. “Although not very many, admittedly. You understand

then, why so many *real* vampires, werewolves, and even the occasional pixie, actually come to live with the Foots. Don't you?"

"Because here, they can be *who* they are, and not just *what* they are." James stopped and frowned. "Er, right?"

Wood nodded heartily. "Well said, James. That's exactly it. But there is one more thing that the former Bigfoot President and Chancellor Franklyn impressed upon me when I took this post." He leaned forward and crossed his arms on his desk, cupping his elbows. He studied James seriously. "They told me that Bigfoot House really is the moral core of all the campus societies. And as such, it is held to a rather higher standard of conduct. Fairness, honesty, respect, courage, these are the things that are exemplified by the Bigfoot banner, and these must be applied to *all* areas of life. Most specifically, at least as far as you and I are concerned, these qualities are meant to be demonstrated on the sporting field. Chancellor Franklyn was very clear about this when he asked me to take the post of House President. He knew I had played professional Quidditch, you see, and worried that I might allow my love of victory to cloud my judgment in this regard. Winning, he told me, must always be secondary to self respect and the courage of one's convictions. I vowed to them that I completely concurred with that philosophy. In the years since, I have tried very hard, James, to maintain that record--not a record of wins and losses, you see, but a record of honorable matches, well-played and strenuous, with an eye, ultimately, to fairness and respect."

Wood stopped, and James realized that the professor's eyes had grown rather unfocused. He wasn't quite looking at James, but rather into the darkness of the game room. James waited, fearing the worst--that Wood was going to forbid Team Bigfoot from using their recently acquired game magic in the night's tournament match.

"We've lost every year," Wood finally said, blinking and returning his gaze to James. "Not just the tournament, but nearly every single match. We've always had a good team, a solid team, but we've never won. We were building character, though. At least, that's what I told myself. And building character is important, no question."

Wood paused again, as if struggling with himself.

"Character is important," James began, but Wood waved him into silence.

"I've allowed you to teach Team Bigfoot game magic, James," he said seriously. "It was against my better judgment, but I allowed it. Because I saw that while you were teaching the team to play in a way that was decidedly unlike previous Bigfoot teams, going back over a century, you were still managing to play each match with respect, honor, and fairness. Er, *Mostly*. And then, you introduced the concepts of the magical martial arts--*Artis Decerto*. You built that clockwork contraption in the back garden, with the help of Professor Cloverhoof and some of the Zombie House students. This, again, was contrary to my better judgment. And yet I allowed it. Perhaps it was a mistake. And yet, I saw that there *might* be some good in it. *Artis Decerto* is a respected discipline, after all, if used wisely and with self-control."

Wood was nodding slightly, thoughtfully. James was afraid to speak now, afraid of the boom he felt certain was about to fall. He held his breath. Wood met his gaze once more, gravely this time.

“I received a visit from the Chancellor this morning, James,” he said carefully. “He is... *concerned*. He has been watching the progress of Team Bigfoot very closely, and while he is not claiming that we have done anything *wrong*, precisely, he *did* acknowledge some growing trepidation about our very non-traditional methods. It has reached his attention that you have been making the rounds to the other houses--all but Werewolf House, of course--seeking assistance in defeating Team Werewolf in tonight’s match. James, is this correct?”

James felt pinned to the chair. He pressed his lips together so tightly that they became a thin white line on his face. He nodded, once.

Wood sighed and leaned back in his chair again. “Chancellor Franklyn made his wishes quite clear, James. He is no longer only worried about the integrity of Bigfoot House, but of the entire school in general. He feels that you have broken the unspoken code of Apollo Mansion, and reversed the moral standard that we are meant to uphold for the sake of the rest of the campus.”

“But--!” James began, only to be waved into silence again by Professor Wood.

“He did not tell me what to do, James,” the professor went on. “He left the decision to me, and I’ve been thinking about it all day.”

Wood stopped once more. He seemed to be studying James, his face very stern and solemn. Nearly thirty seconds went by. The disarmadillo snorted, stirred and got up. It waddled over to Wood, who petted it on its plated head, not taking his eyes from James.

“I’ve made my decision,” the professor finally said quietly, emphatically. “You see, I am aware of the things people say about me around the campus. I am aware that they believe I don’t have the heart to win anymore; that I left my passion for victory on the Quidditch pitch back in England. Maybe they are even partly right. After the Battle, it was hard to think about using magic that way again, even in a sporting match. And yet, I *believe* in the deeper mission of Bigfoot House. I am committed to it, no matter what. And thus, James, after my conversation with Chancellor Franklyn this morning, I have made my decision. I have decided to do... nothing.”

James blinked. He shook his head slightly, as if to clear it, and then craned his head toward the man behind the big crooked desk. “Excuse me, sir?”

“I’m not going to do anything,” Wood said simply, raising his eyebrows and turning his hands palm up over the desk. “I’ve been watching you lot myself, James. I’ve seen the exact same things that the Chancellor has, and yet I have interpreted them entirely differently. You have learned to play the game very well, all of you, and to strive for excellence, all *without* sacrificing your integrity or the dignity of your opponents. You have trained yourselves to become superior based solely on your skills and discipline. You have sought to be creative and intelligent on the Clutch course while still playing with honor. Now, you have succeeded in rallying nearly the whole school to your side--going so far even as to earn their entirely fair and legal assistance. Where Chancellor Franklyn sees potential debauchery, I happen to see a team that has played so well, and yet so fairly,

that even those whom they have defeated wish to assist them on to further victory. If this in itself does not perfectly exemplify the sort of moral standard that Bigfoot House has always strove to maintain, then I daresay nothing does.”

As Wood spoke, a grin of dawning realization grew onto James’ face. Wood wasn’t going to forbid them from using the new game magic. Wood almost seemed, in fact, to be encouraging them to go on exactly as planned.

“Really, Professor?” James asked, barely able to contain himself. He gripped the fat arms of his reclining chair, pulling himself upright.

“Really, James,” Wood agreed, meeting James’ smile. “Under one condition.”

“What’s that, sir?” James asked, somewhat warily.

“Chancellor Franklyn did not tell me what to do,” Wood said seriously. “He merely shared his concerns, assuming I would comply. I am not. However, I *am* sharing those same concerns with you, and granting you the same responsibility. Whatever the other houses have offered Team Bigfoot by way of help, James, use it well. Use it with honor and integrity or do not use it at all. I could enforce this rule myself, as you know, but if I have learned anything myself over the course of this year, it is that a lesson learned on one’s own is far more deeply rooted than a lesson forced by rules. Will you be wise with what you know? You and the team in general?”

James nodded. “I will, Professor,” he said. “But Jazmine’s the team captain. Shouldn’t you be having this conversation with her as well?”

Wood smiled crookedly. “I already have,” he agreed. “And she said the same thing that you did. I am content. Thank you, James. I’m sure you have preparations to make for tonight’s big event. You are dismissed.”

James grinned and nodded. Jumping up, he ran back toward the stairs, threading his way through the assembled couches, tables and mismatched floor lamps. Just as he began to tromp up the stairs, Wood called his name one more time.

“Yes sir?” James replied, stopping and peering back across the game room.

Wood was still smiling, but it was unlike any other smile James had ever seen on the man’s face. It was wide, tight, and very slightly frightening.

“I *haven’t* forgotten what it means to win, James,” he said, his voice calm but emphatic in the empty room. “But I *had* forgotten how *really excellent* it feels. If Team Bigfoot is going to win the tournament tonight, then we have to give it absolutely everything we’ve got, and do it with as much heart, guts and pride as we can.”

“Yes sir,” James agreed, grinning eagerly. For the first time, he thought he was seeing Oliver Wood the way his father had seen him, back when he’d been the student captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, driven to excellence and hungry for victory.

Wood nodded and narrowed his eyes. “Go on, then,” he said with restrained fervor. “And let’s put those wolves in their place.”

James ran the rest of the way up the stairs, his heart nearly bursting with excitement and delight.

It wasn't until later that afternoon, as he was gathering his Clutch gear from under the bed in his dormitory room, that it occurred to him that Chancellor Franklyn might have had ulterior reasons for talking to Wood about Team Bigfoot's playing style. Perhaps--just perhaps--Franklyn *had* learned the secret of Magnussen's riddle about the eyes of Roberts. Franklyn was, after all, incredibly smart. Perhaps he knew that if Apollo Mansion ever again sat upon Victory Hill, it would complete the cornerstone, potentially activating the Nexus Curtain. If so, he had probably done everything he could to assure that that would never happen, even going so far as to invent a ruse that would discourage any Bigfoot House President from leading his Clutch team to victory.

If that had been Franklyn's goal, then James had to give the man credit: it had very nearly worked.

If the President of Bigfoot House had been anyone other than Oliver Wood, it still might have.

Thinking this, James grabbed his wrist gauntlets, jersey and shoulder pads. A minute later, he met the rest of Team Bigfoot along with Ralph and Zane on the steps outside Apollo Mansion. Noisily, excitedly, accompanied by encouraging cheers from many along the way, the troop began to make their way across the campus, heading toward Pepperpock Down, and into Clutchcudgel history.

*Here endeth chapter twenty-one. Only a few more chapters left! Come on over to the Grotto Keep forum or the James Potter Facebook page and let us know what you think!*