



23. THE BEGINNING OF THE END

For the Bigfoots, most winning matches had ended in a victorious evening's celebration at the Kite and Key, crowded around a few tables in their usual corner, quaffing Butterbeers and licorice sodas. The ending of the tournament match, however, launched a major event that nearly the entire campus turned out to watch.

Thanks to the Werewolves' recent string of championship victories (due in no small part to the now destroyed werewolf statue), the March of the Houses had not been witnessed at Alma Aleron for over a decade. Apart from the teachers, hardly anyone had ever seen it. Ares Mansion had become a fixture on Victory Hill, and many had begun to think that it would never move again. They might have been right if Albus had not discovered the secret of Stafford Havershift's bewitched werewolf statue. Even now, already, rumors about the broken bronze statue were circulating among the student populace. James heard snippets of them, although he wouldn't hear Albus' complete story until later, during the journey home. Some students were whispering that the statue had been magical and had come alive, forcing Professor Jackson to destroy it. Others claimed that it had been a good luck charm that had been overwhelmed by the Werewolves' tournament loss, resulting in its spontaneous destruction.

Regardless of the reason, as Team Bigfoot gathered at the base of Victory Hill, James saw that the imposing statue was, indeed, destroyed. Its rear half lay several feet away from its base, and while

James couldn't be certain, it looked to him as if the pose of the remaining half was rather different than it had been when he'd seen it last.

"People are saying that the statue just exploded as soon as the Werewolves lost," Ralph said, crowding between James and Jazmine Jade. "Like it committed *statuicide* in shame or something."

"I don't blame it," Zane commented from James' other side.

Beside him, Warrington scoffed. "Who cares what happened to it? If it was me, I'd leave it there like a trophy even after Ares Mansion scampered off with its tail between its legs." James noticed that Warrington was still wearing the Bigfoot jersey he'd donned earlier in order to play reserve.

Behind the team, the crowd from Pepperpock Down was still milling around, congregating noisily in the quad between Administration Hall and Victory Hill, packing the lawns in excited anticipation. Team Werewolf was nowhere in sight and James assumed that they were simply waiting it out in their locker cellar, refusing to watch the moving of the houses. Viktor Krum, unfortunately, had left immediately after the match along with James' mum and sister. Word had leaked back to James that they had received an urgent message via the Shard, which Ginny had been carrying in her purse in the hope of news from her husband.

James' dad, of course, was out on his reconnaissance mission to New Amsterdam, accompanied by Titus Hardcastle, in preparation for tomorrow's raid. Viktor himself had wanted to go along, but Harry had been adamant in his refusal--taking more than two spies on the night's mission would have been conspicuous, he'd said, and he had no intention of alerting the new W.U.L.F. leader to the impending raid. James was quite glad that his father had insisted that Viktor stay behind for the night. If he hadn't, the game would have ended in forfeit before it was barely half over.

Now, in the wake of the Bigfoot victory, cheers still rang out from the gathering throng and pops of fireworks sounded in the hot evening air, flashing their colors up onto the Hill and the stern facade of Ares Mansion.

"So how's this going to happen?" Ralph asked, glancing around at the throng. "Does Franklyn or somebody need to come out and, like, levitate the houses or something?"

Gobbins shook his head. "I don't think so. I think the March of the Houses is old magic, set up by Pepperpock and Roberts and the rest back when they first built the Aleron. I think it happens all by itself. We just wait and watch."

Even as Gobbins spoke, a low, ominous groan arose. James felt the rumble of it in his chest and the soles of his feet. It throbbed in the air, blotting out the other noises rather like a base note on a gigantic magical amplifier. Immediately, the crowd hushed into bright-eyed silence. James looked toward Ares Mansion, but it simply sat there, unmoving, its windows unlit and blank like stubborn, staring eyes.

"Is this it?" James called, raising his voice over the thrumming rumble.

Zane shook his head, glancing around. “Must be! Look!” He pointed--not at Ares Mansion, but backwards, over the heads of the throng behind them. James and the rest of Team Bigfoot turned around and gasped.

Hovering over the crowd, casting its humongous blocky shadow onto the upturned faces was Apollo Mansion. It looked exactly the same as always except that you could see inside the dark footprint of its foundation: a square of heavy bricks, surrounding what was, unmistakably, the ceiling of the erstwhile basement game room. Clods of dirt and mortar pattered down over the crowd as the structure drifted overhead, moving like a giant parade balloon. A round white shape peered from one of the upper windows and James saw that it was Geoffrey Kleinschmidt, the Bigfoot reserve player who'd been too sick to make it to the match. He waved gamely, grinning, his hair poking up in an unruly stew.

“We won!?” he hollered down, both as a question and a statement, and the crowd roared back, laughing and cheering.

Slowly, ponderously, Apollo Mansion approached Victory Hill, passing over the crowd and emitting that deep, throbbing rumble. As it swept over James' head, he almost thought he could reach up and touch the rafters of the basement ceiling. He laughed out loud as he saw the disarmadillo hunkered on top of one of those rafters, crouched in a sort of alert ball, eyes blinking down at the crowd below.

As the house passed over the lawn of Victory Hill, casting its shadow over the broken werewolf statue, James was surprised to see that Ares Mansion was still there, sitting stubbornly on the Hill's foundation.

“Go on!” Zane called, grinning. “Beat it, house!”

“Yeah!” the members of Team Bigfoot joined in, raising their fists. Soon, the entire crowd rallied the cry, cheering and jeering raucously.

Ares Mansion did not budge, however, even as the shadow of Apollo Mansion crept up its front, casting its reflection onto the tall staring windows. Finally, gently, Apollo Mansion nudged the front corner of its counterpart. The sound of it was a soft, rattling *crunch*. In response, Ares Mansion shuddered slightly and seemed almost to let out a resigned sigh. A moment later, it arose from the foundation of Victory Hill, producing a long, crumbling, *ripping* noise.

The crowd erupted into cheers again as the houses traded places, moving like elephantine dancers. Slowly, almost sheepishly, Ares Mansion began its long march down Victory Hill and toward the empty foundation on the opposite end of the mall. In its place, Apollo Mansion settled slowly atop Victory Hill, its footprint meeting perfectly with the gaping foundation beneath it. The ground shook as the weight of the house settled and a puff of masonry dust arose all around it, pale in the moonlight.

The crowd redoubled its cheers, and the members of Team Bigfoot looked around at each other in amazement. Wentworth was there by then, his fingers wrapped in white bandages. Next to him, also wearing various bandages and braces, were Norrick, Mukthatch, Troy Covington, and the rest of the disabled players. Geoffrey Kleinschmidt burst through the front door in his pajamas, his

hands raised as if the crowd was cheering solely for him. He made his way down the walkway and joined the team where they stood beaming at one another, happy for the moment beyond words.

“Go on in!” Ophelia Wright cried out, nudging James forward. “Check out your new digs! See what the view looks like from Victory Hill!”

“You too,” Jazmine called, turning to the reserve players from the other houses. “All of you! Tonight, you’re *all* Bigfoots!”

“Watch your mouth!” Warrington replied, frowning, but he didn’t argue when the gathering pushed him up the footpath toward Apollo Mansion.

James thought that the building had been transformed, somehow. It looked exactly the same as it always had--just a big blocky mansion, perhaps a little too symmetrical and rather lacking in embellishment--but now, seated atop Victory Hill, the things that had once made it boring now made it regal. *It’s the angle*, he thought, looking up at it as he approached, smiling with pride and triumph. *This is where it was originally built, I’d bet my skrim on it. This is how it was meant to be seen...*

This thought was interrupted, however, even as James put his foot on the first step of the main entrance. A very loud, very strange noise fell over the entire campus, shocking the crowd into silence. James glanced back, alarmed.

“What’s tha--” Zane began, but was drowned out by the noise as it sounded again. It was a sort of metallic creak, long and ragged, followed by a rumble and a distant tinkle of breaking glass.

“Is that still the March of the Houses?” Ralph frowned, his eyes wide and nervous.

Next to him, Warrington shook his head. “No. That’s coming from over there, just past Admin Hall.”

“It’s the Medical College,” a voice cried from the crowd. “Something’s wrong with it. Look out!”

The crowd began to move then in that alarming, sluggish way that only large groups of suddenly frightened people can move. They pushed and clambered, backing away from the corner nearest the beige bricks of the Medical College.

James looked, remembering what he had seen earlier, the small gathering in front of the Medical College’s main entrance--Uncle Percy, Lucy, Izzy, and the group of Wizarding Court agents. The arbiter, Albert Keynes, had not been in sight, but he had to have been there somewhere.

“What have you done?” James asked under his breath, his eyes widening. He realized, with no real surprise, that the question wasn’t addressed to Keynes.

As he watched, the lights of the beige building flickered, flashed, and then fell dark. Inside, monstrously, that awful noise sounded again, creaking and groaning rather like a beast in pain. And then, with no warning, most of the windows on the nearest side of the building exploded outwards.

Glass tinkled and flashed like confetti, spreading out and down into the nearby trees. Another noise followed--a sort of massive crumpling crash, and the face of the building *changed*. It

sucked inward, distorting the shape of the structure as if it had been punched by a gigantic invisible fist. Bricks and broken masonry showered down into the bushes.

“It’s imploding!” Zane announced, both frightened and amazed. “What could make it *do* that?”

Not a what, James thought, but didn’t say, *a who*.

Debris rained down from the face of the Medical College, but the noise fell away. The event seemed to have spent itself. A moment later, James sensed movement at the far edge of the crowd, closest to the distorted building. The gathering was parting, spreading away from some moving nucleus. James stood on tiptoes, trying to see who or what it was. From his vantage point atop Victory Hill, he could finally see.

It was, of course, Petra.

She was walking away from the Medical College, her face pale and calm. Accompanying her, one on each side, were Izzy and Lucy. Both younger girls looked around at the parting throng, their eyes bright in the darkness.

James broke away from his friends and moved down the footpath of Victory Hill, meeting Petra as she emerged from the crowd. No one had tried to stop her or even to question her. Perfect silence hung over the scene as everyone watched, inexplicably breathless.

Petra met James’ eyes. She looked tired and drawn but otherwise perfectly normal. She was holding Lucy’s right hand and Izzy’s left. Slowly, she glanced aside at the broken statue where it lay nearby, glinting in the moonlight.

“Congratulations, James,” she said weakly, and offered him a small affectionate smile. “You won.”



A ripple of commotion moved over the crowd as realization dawned on those closest to the front: this was Petra Morganstern, the one who had attacked the Hall of Archives and cursed Mr.

Henredon, the one who had been escorted to the Medical College unconscious, in preparation for her imprisonment.

“But they gave her the poison apple!” someone whispered harshly. “How’d she wake up?”

“She’s a criminal,” another rasped. “She’s dangerous!”

And another: “Look what she did to the Medical College!”

A low clamor arose from the crowd, spreading to a rabble. Then, louder voices called out in commanding tones. James looked up and didn’t know whether to be relieved or dismayed to see Chancellor Franklyn approaching, shouldering through the throng. Professor Jackson and Mother Newt were close behind, their faces grim. Inexplicably, Albus seemed to be following along in Professor Jackson’s wake, his eyes shining with the excitement of it all.

“Ms. Morganstern,” Franklyn announced as he broke through the crowd. “What are you doing? Return to the Medical College at once! Where are your guards?”

“I’m sorry, Chancellor,” Petra said, and James heard in her voice that she truly was. “I’m sorry for everything that’s happened. But I won’t be going back. Perhaps I will be able to repair everything. But not now. There are more pressing matters.”

“There are no more pressing matters, miss,” Jackson proclaimed grimly. James saw that the professor had his wand in his hand, at the ready. Albus peered avidly around Jackson’s elbow as he went on. “You are a convicted criminal. You understand that we cannot allow you to leave this campus.”

“And you understand, I think, that there is no way you can stop me,” Petra replied, almost apologetically.

Jackson raised his wand. Franklyn saw this and raised his as well, his face strained. He opened his mouth to speak, but Mother Newt interrupted him.

“What is it you need to do, my dear?” she asked, moving ahead of the two men and smiling curiously at Petra.

Petra looked aside, at James. “We have a journey to make,” she answered. “Not far and yet, I think, very far indeed. Are you still with me, James?”

James nodded. “But how do you know about that? I never got a chance to tell you...?”

“I know because you know,” she said, and James understood: the silver thread. It ran both ways. She may not have understood the plan before her arrest, but she did now. James could see it in her eyes as she looked at him.

“And what, if I may be so bold,” Mother Newt asked, still smiling faintly, “is the purpose of this journey?”

James answered this time. “To find out the truth, ma’am.”

Franklyn shook his head firmly. “No. I cannot allow this. Professor Newton, you do not understand what it is they intend to do. They mean to open the Nexus Curtain. You see that Apollo

Mansion once again stands atop Victory Hill. Given the proper key, they may succeed in passing through into another dimension. The young lady means to escape into a realm where none will be able to follow her!”

“That’s not true,” James called out, moving to get in front of Petra. “Petra doesn’t need to escape because she’s not guilty!” He stopped and then glanced back over his shoulder, his brow knitted. “Er... are you?”

Petra met his gaze but didn’t respond. At least, not with words.

“Chancellor,” Mother Newt said, “as a matter of fact, I am inclined to disagree with you. I do not believe that Ms. Morganstern means to escape. I believe that she is telling us the truth. About everything.”

“All evidence to the contrary, Professor,” Jackson said, his wand still raised and pointed at Petra, “how could you possibly know this?”

Mother Newt’s smile broadened as she continued to stare at Petra. “Call it *woman’s intuition*,” she said with low emphasis. “Besides, I suspect that she is right about one more thing: I don’t believe we can stop her even if we wished to. She is...,” Mother Newt paused and narrowed her eyes, “... *unique*.”

“Professor Newton,” Franklyn said, shaking his head again, making his square spectacles flash in the moonlight, “we cannot simply allow this woman to leave. She is a convicted prisoner of the Wizarding Court of the United States.”

“But she *isn’t* leaving, not technically,” Mother Newt replied lightly. “If you are right, Chancellor, then Ms. Morganstern will simply be entering Apollo Mansion. She can still be said to be confined to the campus. None would deny that fact. Thus, I believe, we can be honestly said to have performed our duties as well as could be expected under the circumstances.”

“Madam,” Jackson began, but Mother Newt stopped him with a quick backward glare.

“Put down your wand, Theodore,” she said, her voice suddenly steely. “Don’t be a fool. We are teachers. This is, as they say, well above our pay grade.”

“She is a prisoner of the Wizarding Courts,” Franklyn insisted urgently, lowering his own wand.

“And we are not arbiters,” Mother Newt answered, sighing. “Let the young lady do what she means to do. She will return. Won’t you, dear?” she asked, addressing this last to Petra.

“If I can,” Petra answered. “And I will submit to whatever consequences there are when I do. I am hoping that things will look a bit different by then. To all of us.”

Franklyn’s face was red with tension. Jackson appeared to be balanced precariously between raising his wand again and submitting to Mother Newt’s suggestion.

“Thank you, Professor,” Petra said to the older woman across from her.

“Please,” Newt said, smiling in a grandmotherly fashion, “call me Mother Newt.”

Petra turned to James again and then glanced aside toward Ralph and Zane, who had also approached, their eyes wide and grave.

“I guess I’ll go get the unicorn horseshoe,” Zane suggested in a hushed voice. “It’s still buried under the Warping Willow...”

“No need,” Petra said. She let go of Lucy’s hand and reached into a pocket on the front of her drab dress. James would have sworn that the pocket was too small to contain anything so large, but when Petra withdrew her hand, she was holding the silvery horseshoe. It glowed faintly and a low murmur of awe and fear thrummed through the crowd.

“Dear God,” a voice said faintly. James glanced back and saw Chancellor Franklyn staring up at the horseshoe, his face draining of color. *He’s figured it all out*, James thought. *Just like that. He is one smart fellow...*

“I didn’t expect we’d be doing this in front of the entire school,” Ralph muttered, accepting the horseshoe as Petra handed it to him.

“It doesn’t matter,” Petra said, smiling wanly. She turned to Lucy and Izzy. “You both stay here. There’s no need for you to come.”

Izzy made no effort to let go of Petra’s hand and James understood that Petra’s suggestion was merely perfunctory. There was no way Izzy would consent to staying behind.

“I want to come,” Lucy said, looking from Petra to James. “I want to see. I don’t know anything about what’s going to happen, but I’m in on it now, no matter what.”

James expected Petra to forbid Lucy, but the older girl merely nodded. She looked back at Ralph, who still held the faintly glowing horseshoe.

“Let’s do it,” Zane announced stoically. “Let’s get it over with.”

Together, the three boys and three girls turned and walked up Victory Hill, approaching the corner of Apollo Mansion. The remainder of Team Bigfoot gathered silently around them, but at a careful distance. All of them could see the horseshoe shape engraved in the building’s cornerstone, divided by the crack between the main house and the permanent foundation.

“What’s this all about, James?” Jazmine asked quietly. James glanced back at her.

“It’s... a long story,” he answered after a moment. “But it’s not a bad story. Petra is my friend. I have to try to help her.”

“You’ll tell us all about it when you get back, right?” Wentworth suggested, frowning slightly.

“Definitely,” Ralph nodded, producing his large wand. Its lime-green tip glowed dimly in the moonlight.

“You want us to come too?” Gobbins asked. “Because we could, you know.” The rest of the team, even the reserve players, murmured agreement.

“No,” James replied, smiling, “but thanks.”

“Whew,” Norrick breathed. “Good luck, then. Wherever you’re going, and whatever you’re gonna do when you get there, good luck.”

Mukthatch let out an encouraging woof.

Ralph turned around and held the horseshoe up, measuring it against the shape carved into the conjoined cornerstone.

“Petra,” James asked quietly, turning to look at her, “what happened back there, in the Medical College? What happened to Keynes?”

Petra met his gaze thoughtfully. “He’s still alive,” she answered simply. James sensed her thoughts and sensed that this was the truth. It wasn’t *all* of the truth, he knew, but for now, it was enough.

He moved a step closer to her so that no one else would hear. “Is it true, Petra?” he whispered. “Are you a... a sorceress?”

Her eyes hadn’t left his. “Yes,” she mouthed, and shrugged faintly. Tears stood in her eyes, shining dully. She tried to smile, but it faltered.

James nodded. For now, there was nothing more to say.

With a soft grating sound, Ralph pushed the unicorn horseshoe into the shape engraved in the cornerstone. There was no shocking noise or burst of magical light, and yet the crowd responded. A sigh of awe washed over the quadrangle. James looked up, as did the rest. A faint rose-colored light glowed from every window of Apollo Mansion. It shifted softly, seeming to hint at every color of the rainbow and even some colors that James had never imagined.

“I guess we go inside,” Lucy suggested, her voice an octave higher than usual. “Is that it?”

James nodded. He reached out, took Lucy’s hand in his right and Petra’s in his left. Slowly, the group began to walk toward the main entrance of Apollo Mansion.

“Boys!” a voice called suddenly. James paused again with one foot on the first step. He looked back and saw Chancellor Franklyn peering up at him, his face lit with the soft, rosy light.

“If you see Ignatius Magnussen,” Franklyn said earnestly, “tell him... tell him to stay away. Tell him not to come back. Will you do that?”

With those words, James thought he finally understood Franklyn’s reasons for wanting to keep the Nexus Curtain closed for good. Magnussen, despite being Franklyn’s friend, had been a monster. If he had escaped through the Nexus Curtain, then perhaps--hopefully--it had been a one-way trip. Perhaps the only way the murderer could ever return would be if the Curtain was opened again from this side. Franklyn had made it his life’s mission to assure that that never happened.

“He won’t be coming back, Chancellor,” Ralph answered stolidly, raising his voice just enough to be heard. “Trust us.”

Franklyn studied Ralph’s face for a moment and then nodded slowly.

A moment later, Zane reached for the door handle atop the short stoop of Apollo Mansion. He gripped it, thumbed the latch, and pushed it open. The mysterious pulsing light covered every surface inside, shifting hypnotically.

“All of us together,” Petra said, squeezing James’ hand. “Everyone hold onto someone else. I think the moment we cross over the threshold, we’ll go through. I think the whole house is the portal. Ready?”

James gulped. Ralph shuddered. Zane said, “You all go on ahead. I’m just gonna pop back to Hermes House for my camera. ’Kay?”

Ralph grabbed the blonde boy’s hand and Zane gripped it, tittering nervously.

As one, the six stepped through the doorway into the faint rosy light, and vanished.



James’ first step into the World Between the Worlds nearly tumbled him headlong over a rocky black cliff. Petra and Lucy were still holding his hands on either side and they pulled him back even as his foot dipped into empty space. He gasped as he drew his foot back and wobbled on the ledge. The six travelers peered carefully down into the misty distance.

They seemed to be standing on the lip of a shallow cave worn into a cliff of sharp black stone. A hundred feet below, monstrous waves slammed against the face of the cliff, sending up explosions of white water as if in slow motion. Beyond this, steely gray ocean stretched off toward the horizon, heaving beneath a low, white sky.

James shuddered. “I nearly fell into that,” he commented, wide-eyed.

“This isn’t the most convenient place to put a portal,” Zane nodded. “Even if you survived the drop, who knows what kind of monsters swim around in an ocean like that?”

“None at all,” Petra answered, her voice calm but emphatic. “There’s nothing alive in that water. Nothing at all. You can sort of feel it, can’t you?”

Lucy frowned. It was almost a grimace of disgust. “Yes,” she answered. “It’s like this isn’t really a place at all. It’s more like a kind of window dressing, something just to take up the space. There’s no... no *taste* to it. No life or color at all. It’s like chewing on cardboard.”

“Or like taking a peek behind the curtain of reality,” Ralph agreed, his face tense. “Like it’s here just because something *has* to be, but it’s not meant to be seen by anyone.”

“I think it makes sense,” Izzy said, still holding Petra’s hand.

Petra agreed. “It’s not really a world after all,” she mused. “It’s just the World *Between* the Worlds.”

“Look,” Zane suddenly pointed, raising his arm toward the distant horizon. “It isn’t *all* just water. There’s something out there.”

James followed Zane’s pointing finger. Very faint and distant, a dark shape clung to the horizon.

“Is it a boat?” Lucy asked doubtfully.

Ralph shook his head. “It’s an island, I think. But not like any island I’ve ever seen. It looks almost like a big giant footstool.”

“It’s a plateau,” Petra said. “Just like this one, I think. Look over to the right. There’s another one.”

“There’s more on this side,” Zane added, peering around the boulders of the cave’s left edge.

James leaned carefully out over the rocks of the cave’s mouth, scanning the length of the watery horizon. The shapes were gray in the ocean mist, so far off as to be almost invisible, but once you began looking for them, more and more of them seemed to appear. They were eerily similar: rocky plateaus, oddly flat on top, rising like giants’ stepping stones out of the monstrous ocean.

“What are they?” Izzy asked in a hushed voice.

“They’re portals,” Petra answered, and James did not doubt her. “Like this one. Each one leads to a different universe, or dimension, or reality. Some of them would be almost exactly like our own. Others would be so different, so alien, that we could barely look at them.”

“They’re awful,” Lucy proclaimed with a shiver, hugging herself.

“No,” Petra countered. “They’re just themselves. They aren’t good or bad. They just are.”

Ralph asked, “Do you think this whole world is covered with them?”

Petra shook her head. “It isn’t a world. It isn’t round, and it doesn’t have an end. But yes. I think all of it is like this. On and on, infinitely. If one had a boat, just think of the places they could go, the things they could see.”

James shuddered again at the thought. The idea of taking a boat out onto that strangely disastrous, unnaturally flat ocean was horrible. Looking out over all that distance and those endless bland islands, James wanted nothing more than to crawl back into the shallow of the cave and huddle into a ball. He turned around and was both amazed and relieved to see a door standing in

the shadows of the cave. It was framed with wood and James recognized it immediately as the front entrance of Apollo Mansion, seen from the inside. It hung open and through it, James could still see the slope of Victory Hill, the broken werewolf statue, and the crowd congregated on the quad behind Administration Hall, milling uncertainly.

“I guess that’s how we go back when we’re ready,” he said, gesturing toward the doorway. The others turned and looked, and there was a palpable sense of relief. The view of the dark quad and the familiar campus was very comforting after all that bright, blank vastness.

Lucy finally let go of James’ hand. “So what do we do now?”

James glanced around nervously. “I guess we just look around,” he ventured. “The whole reason we came here is because this is the one place that someone could hide something as powerful as the stolen thread from the Vault of Destinies. If we can find the thread, then perhaps we can find out who really broke into the Archive and prove Petra’s innocence.”

“Not to mention,” Zane added suddenly, as if the idea had just occurred to him, “if we find the missing thread, maybe we can put it back into the Loom! Maybe that would set everything back to rights again! After all, our Loom was switched with one from another dimension, right? It got stuck here instead of reverting back to its own universe because whoever broke into the Vault stole the crimson thread from it! Remember what Professor Jackson said? He said that the switching of the Looms between our dimension and some foreign one changed everything, and maybe even broke the balance of the destinies! He made it sound like if the thread wasn’t returned, eventually things would break down into complete chaos! Maybe if we put it back...”

“Then all of our destinies will snap back to the way they were before the break-in happened,” James said, completing his friend’s thought. “I wonder, is that really possible?”

“Perhaps Petra will never have been arrested?” Izzy suggested, a small ray of hope alighting on her brow.

“Maybe, if we replace the crimson thread,” Zane replied thoughtfully, “then *none* of this will have happened.”

The gathering was quiet for a moment as they all considered this. Finally, James nodded decisively.

“All right then,” he announced. “Everyone take a look around. Let’s see if we can find any evidence that someone from our world was here recently.”

Ralph blinked. “Like, maybe, a candy wrapper or something?”

“Why,” Zane asked, “do you see one?”

“No,” Ralph shook his head, and then pointed. “But there are some stairs carved into the rocks by the ledge over there. Maybe somebody dropped something there...?”

James peered around the larger boy, looking toward the right corner of the cave’s mouth. Just as Ralph had said, a series of worn, narrow steps curved around a boulder, leading out into the dull light.

Lucy asked, "Where do you think they go?"

Petra took a step toward the stairs. "Up," she said simply. She let go of James' hand, renewed her grip on Izzy's, and moved toward the nearly hidden stone staircase. The rest followed in silence.

The stairs did indeed go up. As James followed Petra and Izzy into the strangely flat light of the World Between the Worlds, he saw the stairs rising unevenly before them, carved into the crags of the cliff. The steps were worn smooth with age, and were wet with mist so that James gulped as he began to climb them. He felt the pull of the distance on his left side, heard the shuddering crash of the surf as it reached up, up, trying to drag them all down into it. To compensate, he leaned against the cliff face on his right, nearly hugging it as he climbed. Behind him, Lucy, Zane, and Ralph followed closely, shooting worried glances into the hungry depths.

Several minutes went by. The cliff was remarkably high and James felt that the steps had taken them some distance around the strange island. Finally, unexpectedly, the six travelers reached the top. Petra and Izzy moved a few paces out onto a flat plateau and the rest gathered around them, clustering unconsciously against the gaping white space all around.

James realized where they were even before he saw the black castle. He remembered the hissing shush of the yellow grass and the march of the clouds as the wind pushed them. He'd seen it all in Petra's dream-visions and had assumed it had only been a figment of her subconscious mind. Now, standing on the solid rock of this place, feeling the salty mist on his face and the feather of the wind as it combed through his hair like fingers, he felt the subtle shift of destinies. Here, everything was possible. The six of them were standing on the raw bedrock of reality, from which all dimensions sprang and grew. Here, every footstep had the potential to shake universes. And somehow, deep in the basement of Petra's mind, she had known. She had sensed they would end up here, and because she had known it, so had James. He just hadn't made the connection.

"I sure wasn't expecting that," Ralph breathed, staring with astonishment at the black castle. It stood on the distant ledge of the plateau, defying gravity, encrusted with turrets and conical roofs. Its windows were tall and narrow, glassless, black as doom.

"That's where we need to go," James said, not at all *wanting* to go there, but knowing it was their destination nonetheless. Beside him, Petra nodded.

"Someone's there," Lucy said in a low voice.

Zane peered up at the castle. "Looks empty to me," he commented, a little hopefully. "It almost looks... sort of... dead."

"Nice," Ralph moaned.

Petra spoke calmly. "If there is someone there, then they're expecting us. This is what we came for, isn't it? Let's go. But... keep your wands handy. You never know."

The group began to make their way across the gentle hump of the plateau, wading through the whispering yellow grass. With a sinking jolt, James remembered that he had dropped his own wand during the last seconds of the Clutchcudgel tournament and had completely forgotten to retrieve it afterward. He cursed himself silently, but reminded himself that he was walking alongside

one of the most powerful people in the magical world. If Petra proved unable to confront whatever was to come, then his wand surely would not be of any help anyway.

As the minutes passed, the castle grew gradually closer. It was rather small, at least compared to Hogwarts, but nearly fantastically tall, scraping its towers at the gray clouds. James noticed that just as in the dream-visions, the castle was perched on the ledge of the far cliff, jutting partly over it in complete defiance of gravity. Perhaps magic held it in place or perhaps it was simply balanced there by habit. Either way, it was very disconcerting to look at. James felt that the mere weight of his gaze might be enough to send the structure collapsing backwards into the waiting waves below.

“What’s that?” Izzy asked suddenly, stopping and pointing. James turned and saw an object protruding from the grass some distance away, in the shadow of a low outcropping of boulders. Silently, the troop angled toward the object, cautious but curious.

James was the first to reach it. He peered at it, trying to make sense of the shape of it. It was quite large, but low and streamlined, comprised of wood and metal and draped with tangles of thin, silky rope. It lay tilted onto its side, nearly buried in the grass.

“It looks like a boat,” Ralph suggested uncertainly. “But how could it have gotten up here?”

“It’s not a boat,” Zane called from some distance away. “Look at the hill next to it. See all that old fabric?”

James looked. Next to the boat-shape was a pool of wrinkled blue fabric, faded almost white. It clung to the rocky hill like a skin, poked through in a thousand places with tufts of grass.

“It was an airship,” Lucy said, her voice filled with awe. “Someone came here by air. A long time ago, by the look of it. Maybe decades ago.”

“Maybe even centuries,” Petra added. “There’s no way to know for sure. There’re no bugs here. Nothing to rot the cloth or wood, nothing to corrode the metal. It looks almost like the day it landed except that the balloon is flat and destroyed by the grass that poked up through it.”

“Travelers from one of the other island dimensions, you think?” James asked, approaching the wooden hull and peering in. The inside was nearly empty save for a few seats and a large rudder handle which protruded crookedly from the rear.

“One traveler, at least,” Petra hazarded. “I wonder what dimension he came from? And if he made it into our own world?”

James noticed a series of symbols painted onto the hull of the ship, faded almost into obscurity. Among them was the unmistakable shape of a unicorn, white and stern, its horn a pale purple. Ralph and Zane joined James there and saw the same thing.

“The Rider,” James said quietly. “The one from the tapestries in Erebus Castle! This was his ship. His and the unicorn that came with him.”

“How can that be?” Ralph queried in a low voice. “When the Rider came through, he arrived somewhere back home, in Europe, in the Middle Ages, didn’t he?”

James shook his head. “These portals aren’t like normal doorways,” he replied. “I don’t think time or distance make much difference with them. The Nexus Curtain may always be there, connecting to our world, but it probably looks different every time it opens. It may open up into entirely different times and places in our world. There’s no way of knowing.”

Zane was barely listening. He was moving along the hull of the abandoned airship, studying the symbols painted onto it. “Look,” he said, touching one of the drawings. “The unicorn that came through with the Rider wasn’t just a regular beast. You can see that just by looking at the way it’s painted. It was smart. It wasn’t the *servant* of the Rider.”

“They were partners,” Ralph agreed, leaning to peer at the drawings. “They were explorers.”

James shook his head darkly. “Too bad their explorations led them here.”

They knew the dangers they faced, a thin, ghostly voice said in James’ ear.

The three boys startled and spun around, their eyes bulging. Behind them, staring at them with sad curiosity was a wispy grey shape, almost invisible in the flat light of the plateau. It was the figure of a woman, young and moderately pretty, with huge eyes and a small, sad mouth.

Sorry, she said faintly. *I didn’t mean to frighten you.*

“Are you a gh-gh--,” Ralph stammered, his face going white. “A *ghost*?”

“Oh good grief, Ralph,” Lucy said, approaching and shaking her head. “You had a ghost teacher for the last two years at Hogwarts.”

“Yeah,” Ralph admitted a little defensively. “Well, it’s one thing to have a scheduled class with one. It’s another thing to have one whisper in your ear when you’re exploring some weird dead island.”

Sorry, the ghost said again, drifting backwards. *It’s been so long since I’ve seen anyone. I forget what it’s like to deal with the living.*

“Who are you, miss?” Petra asked, tilting her head thoughtfully.

My name is Fredericka, the ghost answered, and made a dutiful curtsy with her transparent hands. *Fredericka Staples. I’ve been here ever since I...* She paused before finishing, as if she was embarrassed or reluctant to admit it. *Um, ever since I died.*

“Fredericka Staples,” James said, his eyes widening. “You’re the one who... the woman that Magnussen...! Er!”

The ghost nodded and pressed her lips together, obviously not wishing to discuss the topic.

“Who?” Lucy asked, but James shook his head.

“She died on the campus of Alma Aleron,” he answered quietly. “She was a Muggle and she got mixed up with the wrong dark wizard. I’ll tell you the rest later if you really want to know.”

“I don’t,” Lucy said quickly. “Pleased to meet you, Miss Staples. I think.”

“But I thought there weren’t any ghosts at Alma Aleron,” Ralph commented.

Zane shrugged. "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto."

Ralph rolled his eyes. "I don't know what that means."

Lucy said, "It means we aren't at Alma Aleron anymore, are we? The regular rules don't apply."

"Perhaps," Petra mused, as if to herself. "Perhaps this place is the *reason* there are no ghosts at Alma Aleron. Perhaps the portal into the World Between the Worlds is like a ghostly magnet, sucking them in or driving them away, or even both at the same time."

"But that can't be right," James said. "Nobody can get through the Nexus Curtain without the proper key."

"I think that's only true for the living," Izzy commented thoughtfully. "The dead can get through all *kinds* of doorways that were closed while they were alive."

The ghost of Fredericka Staples nodded. *When I died, there was a huge white light. I knew I was supposed to go to it, but I didn't want to. I wasn't ready to leave yet. I was engaged to be married, you see. My life had barely just begun and I didn't really know then that I had died. Not really. The light drew me to it, but I resisted it. And then, as I pushed back from the white light... something else began to pull at me. It was like the opposite of the white light... it was... a black hole, sort of. It was strong and I couldn't control it. It pulled me in, and then... suddenly... I was here. At first, I thought this was the afterlife, but not for very long. It wasn't either heaven or hell. It was just... here. And there were people here, sometimes.*

James blinked. "You've seen people here?"

Fredericka looked at him and then gestured toward the ancient airship. *More of the ships came once, a long time ago, she said in her thin, far-off voice. They looked just like that one, only bigger. They saw me and spoke to me. They'd traced the journey of the ones who came in that ship and asked me about them. I told them I was sorry, that I didn't know anything about their missing friends. Then they used their tools to learn the truth--that evil magical people had captured the man and the unicorn and killed them--and then they discovered that the same had happened to me. They learned more, though. They learned that not all of the people from our world are like the ones who committed those acts. There are good ones among us, always fighting the bad, but the balance of power is forever changing. They determined that our world was too dangerous for them to explore, and built the black castle as a warning. It's been there ever since, empty and silent. Until very recently.*

"You saw someone else," Petra said. It wasn't a question, but Fredericka nodded anyway, turning her attention to her.

I saw, but I didn't approach. I hid. I knew it was safer that way. Being a ghost has its benefits. Hardly anything can scare you anymore. But some things are worse than death. I hid and I watched.

Petra seemed to understand this. "They went to the castle, didn't they?"

Fredericka nodded, unwilling or unable to say any more.

“That’s where we’re going,” James said, and swallowed past a lump of fear in his throat. “We should keep moving, before it gets dark.”

It never gets dark here, Fredericka instructed blandly. Nothing ever changes here at all. Not even time.

“Come with us, Miss Staples,” Lucy suggested. “Maybe we can help you get back to our own world.”

Fredericka considered this with obvious longing and then shook her head. *I can’t go into the castle, she said. I was afraid to go inside even before... she... arrived. Now I can’t even bear to think of it.*

Petra said, “Do you know where the staircase is, Fredericka? The one that leads down to the cave portal?” When the ghost nodded, Petra smiled. “I think you’ll be able to get back yourself if you really want to. As long as we are here, the portal is open and it’ll take you back to our time and place. Perhaps you can get through and stay there if you try very hard.”

Fredericka looked heartbreakingly hopeful. *Do you really think so?*

“I don’t know,” Petra answered, but James thought she did. “Either way, it’s worth a try. Good luck, Fredericka.”

“Good luck,” James added, and the others joined in.

Thank you, Fredericka said faintly. I think I’m ready to go on now. Into the light, if I can, and whatever is beyond it. Maybe I’ll see you all again on the other side.

“Later rather than sooner,” Ralph said quickly, and the ghost smiled her understanding. A moment later, she turned and seemed to fade from view as she drifted across the plateau.

The gathering watched the ghost of Fredericka Staples vanish and then stood in the constantly shushing grass for a long moment, silent and thoughtful. Finally, still wordlessly, James turned back toward the castle. It stood tall and ominous on the near horizon, casting virtually no shadow in the diffuse light of the World Between the Worlds. The others turned around as well and looked up at the stark shape, weighing their own secret thoughts and fears.

Slowly but surely, the six travelers resumed their journey.

*Here ends chapter twenty-three. Are you ready for the conclusion?
Tomorrow, I will release both of the remaining chapters, thus concluding the story.
See you at noon, CST at www.jamespotterseries.com*