



## 2. THE *GWYNDEMERE*

James couldn't remember the last time he had been awake at such an early hour. The sun was barely a rose-gray suggestion on the horizon, leaving the rest of the sky scattered with faint stars and high clouds, frosted with moonlight. Mist rose from the school grounds and the grass was so wet that James could feel it through his trainers.

"Good morning, James," Izzy, Petra's sister, announced cheerfully, moving alongside him as the travelers made their way into the pearly dawn gloom. "It's exciting, isn't it?"

"It is, actually," James agreed, smiling at the younger girl as she skipped next to him, her blonde curls bouncing around her face. Izzy was a year older than James' sister, Lily, but it was a little hard to remember that. Where Lucy tended to strike people as older than she really was, Izabella Morganstern had a simple innocence that made her seem rather younger. Petra had explained to James and his family that Izzy had been born with some sort of learning disability, one that had earned her the disdain of her own mother and very nearly doomed her to a life of dull servitude at the woman's cold hand. James didn't think that Izzy seemed slow, exactly. On the contrary, it was almost as if her brain was simply blissfully unencumbered by the sorts of nagging worries that left most people grumpy and irritable. James envied her a little bit.

"Petra didn't want to get up when I tried to wake her," Izzy said in a stage whisper, nodding toward her sister, who was walking some distance away, near Percy and Audrey. "She says she's not a morning person."

James nodded. "I'm not either, usually. But this is different, isn't it?"

"It's not like getting up for a day of work on the farm or anything dull like that," Izzy agreed, grabbing James' hand and skipping merrily. "We're off on a grand adventure! We're going for a ride on a ship, just like Treus. Aren't we?"

“Raise ye forth thy wands and wits,” Albus commented from somewhere behind James. “Right ‘Treas’?”

“So how are we getting there, then?” Ralph piped up. James turned to see the bigger boy walking alongside Albus, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his hooded sweatshirt. “Portkey? I’ve always wanted to travel by Portkey. Is it that stump over there?”

“You see who’s leading this little expedition, don’t you Ralph?” James replied, nodding toward the front of the group.

Ralph squinted. “Yeah. It’s Merlin,” he said, and then slumped as realization struck him. “Oh.”

Albus peered ahead at the Headmaster. “What’s that mean, then?”

“It means we’re walking,” James answered, grinning. “Merlin likes to commune with the secret whatsits of nature whenever he gets the chance, don’t you know.”

Ralph sighed. “Why’s he even coming anyway?”

“Simple,” a new voice answered. James glanced up to see Ralph’s father, Denniston Dolohov, walking nearby, his cheeks flushed in the pearly light that sifted down through the trees of the Forbidden Forest. “Back in his time, nobody knew anything about the ‘New World’, although lots of wizards and witches suspected its existence. He’s coming along for a few days before heading back to Hogwarts. I expect he wants to take a look around and see what life is like on the other side of the pond. It’d be like one of us traveling to the distant future and being offered a chance to visit cities on the moon.”

“Now *that* would be cool,” Albus sighed. “Much better than being carted off to stupid old America.”

“I’d be careful with talk like that,” Lucy said. James glanced aside and saw her walking on the other side of Izzy, her duffle bag slung over one shoulder. “I understand that Americans can be fiercely proud of their country. Not unlike some of us, of course.”

“Well, it’s easy for us, isn’t it?” Albus exclaimed. “I mean, we’ve got ourselves loads of history and traditions, going back thousands of years! They’ve got, what? About fifteen minutes and a tea party?”

“Speaking of tea,” Ralph said, rubbing his stomach, “I could use a bite.”

As if on cue, James’ mother drifted back from the front of the group. “Biscuits, anyone?” she said, carrying an open tin.

James shouldered his bag and grabbed with both hands. “Thanks, Mum.”

“Ah! Shortbread,” Izzy exclaimed happily. “We hardly ever got shortbread at home!”

“Merlinus says a little nourishment is needed for the journey,” Ginny commented, nodding. “After all, we’ve got a lot to do and a long way to go.”

“And we’re walking the entire way?” Albus asked around a mouthful of biscuit. “Seriously?”

Ginny nodded. “Merlin sent all of our trunks ahead yesterday afternoon. They’ll be waiting for us at the port. A little exercise will do you some good.”

“Maybe it’ll help you grow a bum,” Lucy suggested helpfully.

“Hah hah,” Albus chimed sarcastically. “So how long is this going to take anyway?”

“Yeah,” Ralph huffed, peering up at the trees as they passed overhead. “What if any of us, you know, faints from hunger or something along the way?”

“We’re here,” a voice called from the front. To James’ surprise, he recognized it as belonging to Neville Longbottom. “Everybody stay close now.”

Albus boggled. “We’re *here*?”

“Is that Professor Longbottom?” Ralph frowned, puzzled. “I mean, fun’s fun, but shouldn’t *somebody* be staying back home to run Hogwarts?”

James, who’d been on one of Merlin’s magical walking trips in the past, grinned. Still clutching a biscuit in one hand, he ran ahead, joining the adults near the front of the group.

“Hi Uncle Percy, Aunt Audrey, Molly,” he called as he passed. “Hi Petra. Good morning.” He darted past her and slowed down as he found his dad, Merlin, and Neville Longbottom walking at the head of the troop. Sure enough, as James looked around, he could see that the trees here looked different. They were no longer the enormous old growth of the Forbidden Forest. These were young trees, choked with weeds and moss, leaning in the shifting wind. The air smelled briny and damp.

“Good morning, James,” Neville said, smiling down at him. “Excited?”

“I am!” James agreed, meeting Neville’s smile. “Why are you coming along? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Professor Longbottom has come at my request, Mr. Potter,” Merlin answered, striding easily down a winding, rocky path. “Besides, even Herbology teachers deserve the occasional holiday. Even if it is a *working* holiday.”

“The Alma Alerons have asked me to give a lecture,” Neville admitted sheepishly. “I was recommended to their Flora Department by Ben Franklyn himself. It seemed an opportunity not to miss.”

“Wands away, everyone,” Harry commented mildly. James looked up as the trees thinned and fell behind them. He could see now that they were on the outskirts of a small crowded fishing village. The morning sky was low and dull, packed with clouds over the rooftops. Smoke drifted listlessly from dozens of chimneys and the streets were wet, their cobbles shining dully. The group tramped their way single file down the curving, stony path until it met the street. An old man with a grizzled white beard was seated on a stool nearby, stooped beneath the awning of a fish shop. He pushed the brim of his cap up with a horny thumb as the group filed past.

“Good morning,” Harry Potter said cheerfully.

“Lovely day for a stroll, isn’t it then?” Ginny added, bringing up the rear.

“Nice town you’ve got here,” Albus cried, turning around and walking backwards, smiling at the man. “Smells a bit funny, but we won’t hold it against you!”

Ginny grabbed him by the arm, spinning him around.

The narrow street descended in a series of sharp switchbacks, passing crowded houses and shops, and eventually emptying out at the seashore. Wharves, docks, and piers festooned the coastline, making a haphazard silhouette against the steely sky. Some of the slips were occupied with rusting fishing boats, others with immaculate touring yachts, still others with enormous, looming cargo ships. Green waves smacked at the hulls, lifting and dropping them monotonously. Merlin whistled as he walked, leading the group along a warped boardwalk, passing ship after ship. Workers in heavy coats and dark woolen caps barely looked up as the group passed by, ogling and wide-eyed.

“What kind of ship will we be going in?” Izzy asked, her voice full of wonder. “Will it be one of the big ones?”

“Probably not one of the big ones,” Petra answered with a smile in her voice.

“Is it a cruise ship?” Ralph mused hopefully. “They have buffets on cruise ships.”

The crew walked on and on. The sun finally began to burn away the dense clouds and became a hard white ball on the horizon, casting its reflection onto the ocean in a long blinding stripe.

“Here we are,” Merlin finally announced. They had reached the end of the boardwalk. It was virtually deserted, overshadowed by a rocky promontory decked with a very antiquated lighthouse. James was surprised to see his grandfather’s old Ford Anglia parked near the end of the boardwalk, its engine idling smoothly.

Albus frowned quizzically. “What’s Granddad’s car doing here?”

Ginny replied distractedly. “Go help your father unload now. Hurry, all of you.”

“Unload what?” Ralph asked as she herded them forward.

Merlin produced his staff, which always seemed to be with him, hidden somewhere just out of sight despite its rather impressive size. He tapped it on the boardwalk and the Anglia’s boot popped open.

“Ah,” Ralph said, answering his own question. “Manual labor.”

“Cool!” Albus crowed, running forward. “It’s got all of our trunks in it. Did you send it ahead all by itself? Can it drive on its own?”

“It was your grandfather who taught it that particular skill,” Merlin replied, smiling. “The more I learn about him, the more impressed I become. Put the trunks right here on the boardwalk, if you please. I will alert the portmaster of our arrival.”

“But where’s the ship?” James asked, glancing around the deserted pier below.

Merlin either didn’t hear him or chose not to answer. He strolled ponderously up the crooked, curving staircase that led to the door of the lighthouse.

“Hop to it, men,” Harry cried heartily, reaching into the boot and heaving out one of the trunks. As with many wizard spaces, the boot was rather larger inside than would have seemed possible from without. Eventually, James, Albus, and Ralph stood next to a precariously stacked tower of trunks, cases, crates, and bags.

“Good thing I had that biscuit,” Ralph breathed, wiping his brow. “Merlin was right. Traveling is hard work.”

James glanced up at the lighthouse, looking to see what the Headmaster was up to. As he watched, the small door in the side of the lighthouse opened. Merlin strode out, his head lowered as he traversed the narrow, leaning stairway.

“Hold tight, everyone,” he announced. “Prepare to board.”

Behind him, a loud, low note suddenly sounded, emanating from the lighthouse’s high lantern. It was a singularly lonely sound, echoing long and deep over the water. James recognized it as the sound of a foghorn. When the sound finally died away, chasing its echoes over the distant waves, a beam of light appeared from the decrepit lighthouse. Ginny gasped at the brilliance of it as it speared out into the gloomy morning, seeming to extend all the way to the horizon. Slowly, the beam began to turn.

James stumbled. He grabbed out and clutched a handful of Ralph’s sweatshirt, only then noticing that Ralph was staggering as well. The two of them clambered backwards against the Anglia.

“What’s happening?” Albus called.

“Stand fast, landlubbers,” Uncle Percy laughed, holding onto his wife Audrey and daughter Molly. “You just haven’t gotten your sea legs yet.”

“Watch,” Lucy announced, pointing toward the lighthouse’s beam.

James watched. Strangely, it seemed as if the beam was, against all probability, standing perfectly still. It was the world itself that was revolving, pulled around in a long smooth axis by the anchor of the spotlight’s beam.

“There,” Harry announced. “Our ship appears to be coming in.”

James followed his father’s gaze and saw a long sleek boat appearing from around the rocky promontory. Like the beam of light, the ship appeared to be standing perfectly still as the ocean revolved beneath it, sending its waves up beneath the bow and turning them into briny foam. The ship was long and sleek, with a polished wooden hull stained deep brown, festooned with glittering brass portholes and fittings, tall, complicated masts and a single black smokestack jutting up from the center. Painted white letters along the prow proclaimed the name of the ship: *Gwyndemere*.

Ponderously, the pier angled toward the ship until it pointed directly at it. Figures moved about on the deck of the ship, shouting to each other and manning the rigging. James grinned as one of the deckhands heaved a length of rope over the side, Disappeared from the deck, and then Reappeared on the pier seconds later to retrieve the rope as it thumped onto the planks. He looped it industriously around an iron bollard, anchoring the *Gwyndemere* to shore. That accomplished, the beam of light ceased turning and switched off. James stumbled again as the world seemed to shudder into place.

“Everyone aboard,” Percy called, striding down onto the pier, clutching his hat to his head as the wind picked up. “We’ve got a schedule to keep.”

Merlin nodded approvingly, and then leaned toward the Anglia's driver's side window. He seemed to tell the car something, patted it lightly, and then stood back as it began to roll. It performed a neat three-point turn on the end of the boardwalk, and then pattered serenely away, its windows reflecting the low sky.

"I hope I packed enough socks," Ralph commented, watching the Anglia amble away. "I'd hate to run out of socks."

"I bet they have socks in America," Albus replied, smacking the bigger boy on the shoulder. "Let's risk it, eh?"

James smiled and followed his family down onto the pier, enjoying the sound of the waves and the misty breeze. Gulls circled overhead and alighted on the waves around the ship, where they bobbed like corks. More deckhands Apparated onto the pier, moving economically toward the stack of baggage, which they began to lug toward the ship.

A gangway appeared, steep and narrow, connecting the ship to the end of the pier. James couldn't be sure if the gangway had grown out of the pier or extended down from the ship. Either option seemed just as likely. He ran ahead, chased closely by Lucy, Izzy, and Petra, who was laughing with delight.

Once aboard, James looked around with unabashed wonder. From the deck, the *Gwyndemere* seemed simultaneously huge and cozy. Its bow and stern decks were separated by two recessed walkways, one on either side of the ship, accessed by stairs at the front and back. The walkways enclosed a high, long deckhouse, which dominated the center of the ship, fronted with the pilothouse. James could see men in white jackets and caps inside, moving busily about. An enormous ship's wheel turned gently back and forth as waves rocked the ship.

"This is so cool," Ralph said, approaching James. "I've never been on a ship before. Do you think a magical ship is any different than a regular ship?"

"You're asking the wrong mate, Ralph," Albus commented. "We're just as new to this as you are. Ask Uncle Percy if you want a real answer. Or Cousin Lucy, for that matter."

"I've only ever traveled by ship once before, believe it or not," Lucy said, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. "And that was a lot smaller than this one, on the way to Greece."

"Have you seen the dining galley yet?" Petra called from the stairs to the lower level. "Breakfast is all laid out, and it's perfectly lovely! Come and join us!"

"They have currant buns!" Izzy added importantly, cupping her hands to her mouth.

James, Albus, Ralph, and Lucy ran to the stairs and ducked into a doorway at the bottom, which opened onto a long low room with windows on either side, letting in the watery morning light. Two long tables dominated the room, bordered on both sides by wooden swivel chairs. Silverware, crystal glasses, china plates and steaming silver tureens and platters were spread over the tables.

"This is more like it!" Ralph exclaimed, pulling off his sweatshirt in the warmer quarters. He strode along the nearer table and took a seat next to his father, who was already stirring a cup of tea.

“Enjoy it while you can, friends,” Denniston Dolohov proclaimed. “This is what it’s like to travel on the Ministry’s Sickle.” Beyond him, the rest of the adults were seating themselves as well, sighing happily and removing their traveling cloaks and hats.

“The chairs are bolted to the floor,” Albus said, swiveling his experimentally.

“In case of storms,” Lucy nodded, speaking around a mouthful of muffin. “Can’t have everything slamming all over the place if the sea gets tetchy.”

Ralph looked up, his brow furrowed. “Is that likely to happen, do you think?”

Lucy shrugged. “It’s the Atlantic ocean. Tetchy is sort of a habit.”

“Especially this time of year,” Albus agreed, reaching for a platter of toast.

James nodded gravely. “We may have to steam right through a hurricane or two. And icebergs.”

“And sea monsters,” Izzy added wisely, meeting Lily’s eyes and stifling a grin. “Giant squid with tentacles like trolley cars!”

“Ah,” Ralph said, rolling his eyes. “Sarcasm, then. I see how it is.”

“Don’t worry, Ralph,” Petra soothed. “We’ve got Merlin with us. If any sea monsters attack, he’ll just talk them into joining us for the trip.”

“Or vanquish them and cook them for dinner,” Lily said, grinning.

A little while later, James had finished his breakfast and discovered he was too excited to sit still any longer. The adults made their way below-decks to explore their cabins while most of the children scrambled back up to the foredeck to enjoy the brightening sun and the misty stamp of the bow on the waves.

“What’s making us move, I wonder?” Izzy asked, squinting up at the masts.

James looked as well, noticing that all of the sails were furled tightly, lashed to the masts in neat bundles.

“Good question,” Albus agreed, frowning. “I guess we’re being powered somehow. Look at the smokestack.”

Sure enough, a steady stream of black smoke was issuing from the smokestack’s high, black funnel. James shrugged, turning back to the ocean view.

“Coal, you think?” Ralph mused. “I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“Maybe it’s a magical fire,” Lily replied reasonably. “One that doesn’t need any fuel or anything.”

Lucy nodded. “Like goblin’s spark. That’d make sense.”

Wind capered over the ship, pushing in from the ocean and whipping James’ hair around his head. He grinned into it, and then turned and leaned on the railing, looking toward the shore as it crept alongside the ship. The *Gwyndemere* was passing the other docks and piers still, and James watched the dozens of ships where they clustered along the bank, dizzying in their sizes and variety. Workers thronged amongst them, moving on the piers and gangways, silent in the distance. Finally,

the *Gwyndemere* began to angle away from the shore, and the wharves and enormous cargo ships began to grow faint in the morning's haze.

A whistle sounded high above. James glanced up and saw a man in what looked like a wooden bucket, attached to the main mast. The whistle protruded from between his lips and he held a long collapsible telescope to one eye. As James watched, the man lowered the telescope and spat out the whistle, which dangled around his neck on a length of string.

"Now exiting the Muggle mainland," he bellowed. "Entering international magical waters."

A deckhand, whistling cheerfully, passed close behind the five travelers where they gathered near the railing. James turned to watch as the man bent, grabbed the handle of a large deck hatch, and heaved it open.

"All right, Dodongo, you heard the man," the deckhand called down into the darkness below-decks. "Put it out then. Don't make me come down there."

James and the rest drifted toward the deckhand and peered down into the shadows. The interior of the hold was huge, taking up most of the ship's bow. Portholes illuminated an enormous, hairy shape where it lounged in the hold, taking up most of the space. James blinked in shock. The creature was like a gorilla, but grown to monumental, titanic proportions. Its great leathery face peered up at the open hatch, sucking its lips thoughtfully. Its feet clutched the pedals of a complicated, brass mechanism, turning it easily. The mechanism, in turn, operated a driveshaft that extended through the rear of the hold, apparently driving the ship's propeller. To James increasing surprise, the gigantic ape seemed to be smoking an equally gigantic cigar, puffing black smoke up into a funnel-shaped tube.

"Picked him up years ago," the deckhand explained, planting his hands on his hips and shaking his head. "Found him wandering some lost island in the South Pacific. Someone had the crazy idea that he'd make a great attraction on the mainland, make us all millionaires. Problem was, once we got him on board, he never wanted to leave. You know the old joke about where a thirty thousand-pound gorilla sits, right? Wherever he bloody well pleases."

James, Ralph, Izzy, Albus, and Lucy looked from the deckhand to the enormous gorilla again. Dodongo pedaled happily, making gentle *ooh* noises to himself and puffing his monstrous cigar.

"Hi!" the deckhand called again, cupping his hands to his mouth. "I told you to put that thing out, didn't I? It's the last one we've got on board until Bordeaux. What else you going to use to fake smokestack smoke, eh? Banana peels?"

"I guess," Lucy said in a small voice, "there *is* a bit of a difference between a Muggle ship and a magical ship."



The first leg of the ocean journey progressed swiftly. James explored the ship with his fellow travelers, finding the galley kitchens, the aft storage hold, a dozen small but meticulously dapper staterooms, and even the captain's quarters, which the crew of teenaged witches and wizards (and Izzy) barged into quite by accident while chasing each other through the narrow corridors. The captain's rooms were in the rear of the ship, above the hold, with a curving bank of windows that overlooked the ship's boiling wake. It would have been a very interesting place to explore, what with its framed maps, brass lanterns, and bookshelves cluttered with curious nautical tools and artifacts, except for the fact that the captain himself was there, looking up from his desk with a mixture of annoyance and weary patience. James had apologized as quickly and formally as he knew how, backing out of the room and herding the others behind him.

Most of the day, however, was spent up on the decks, lounging in the hazy sunlight and watching the crewmen manage the ship's complicated rigging. James was only slightly surprised to learn that the deckhands sang songs while they worked, raising their voices in unison so that the sound carried over all the decks, clear and cheerful in the gusting winds.

"So," Albus said, leaning against the high stern railing, "I wonder if this is the poop deck?"

Izzy tittered, but Petra rolled her eyes. "That joke wasn't funny the first time, Albus. It doesn't get any better with age."

"I'm *not* joking," Albus said, raising his eyebrows with guileless innocence. "I'm just asking a question. Every ship has a poop deck. It's a known fact. I'm just trying to make this an educational experience."

"Yes," Lucy nodded. "Because that's so very like you."

"I like the songs," Ralph said, looking up at the masts as a pair of crewman climbed and capered, singing in harmony. James couldn't help noticing that the sails were still furled, lashed neatly to the strange, articulated masts.

Albus smirked. "Mum says the songs are nice, so long as you don't listen to the actual words."

"Which only makes you pay even closer attention," James agreed. "I especially like the one about the old dead pirates fighting over a doubloon, chopping off bits of each other until there's nothing left but a bunch of skeletal hands hopping around, gripping cutlasses."

"A lot of them do seem to have a similar theme," Petra agreed. "A lot of dead pirates, barrels of rum, cursed lost treasures, that sort of thing."

"I heard Merlin and Dad talking about it at lunch," Albus said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Merlin says ever since the International Magical Police have cracked down on wizard piracy, a lot of the pirates have had to turn to more honest work. Most of them take jobs on ships like this. I bet these blokes are all former privateers themselves! You think?"

Ralph squinted up at the men in the masts. "I'd have expected more peglegs and parrots," he shrugged.

Albus rolled his eyes.

As the afternoon wore on, Petra and Izzy went below-decks to have tea and unpack. Albus wandered off in search of deckhands to grill about their nefarious former lives, and James, Ralph, and Lucy meandered their way to the bow, where they found James' dad, Professor Longbottom, and Merlinus Ambrosius watching the seas and talking.

"Did you see the big gorilla?" James asked as the adults greeted them.

Harry nodded. "The captain took us down to meet him. He's very intelligent. Likes popcorn. Apparently he's the primary mode of propulsion on the landward ends of the journey."

"The captain says it keeps him from getting fat and lazy," Neville added, smiling.

"You met the captain too?" Lucy asked, peering up at the men.

"He's an old wizard's navy man," Neville answered. "And a distant relative of mine. Knew my parents, way back when I was a baby. I haven't seen him in decades, but still, it's nice to connect with the old family network."

Ralph glanced from Merlin to Harry Potter, and then asked, "What are you all looking for?"

"I smell land," Merlin replied mildly. "I think we have nearly reached today's destination."

James blinked. "Already? We're there?"

"Boy," Ralph commented, peering out over the waves, "magic sure makes the world an itty bitty place."

"He doesn't mean we've already made it to America, silly," Lucy said, laughing. "We're stopping at a port along the way."

"What for?" James asked.

"To pick up more travelers," Harry replied, taking off his glasses and wiping sea mist from them with his shirt tail. "And drop off cargo, get supplies, and get rigged for the transatlantic leg of the journey."

"You mean," Ralph said, clarifying, "we've sailed all day, and we haven't yet gotten to the transatlantic part?"

"The ocean is a monstrously large place," Merlin said, smiling, his beard streaming in the wind. "It provides us an excuse not to do anything for a day or two. Enjoy it, Mr. Deedle. Soon enough, the pace of life will catch us all up again."

James looked at Ralph expectantly. "Did you hear the Headmaster?" he prodded gently.

Ralph glanced at him and then rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes. *Monstrously* large. Look, I'm not a big baby. You can stop trying to give me nightmares."

"I would have said the ocean was 'beastly huge'," Lucy said, "but 'monstrously' is even better. Reminds me of those old woodcut maps covered in sea serpents and krakens and the like."

“Is that land over there?” Neville asked suddenly, leaning on the railing and squinting.

Merlin nodded. “It may well be. You can smell it, can’t you? The trees, the sand...”

“Not all of us are quite as sensitive to such things as you are, Headmaster,” Harry replied, shaking his head.

James leaned against the railing and peered into the distance. The sky had grown clear and cloudless as the day progressed. Now, as the sun lowered, the clarity of the air made the horizon seem like something he could very nearly reach out and touch. The ship’s prow bounced rhythmically on the waves, sending up bursts of fine spray. Beyond it, sitting on the watery rim of the world like a bug on a windowsill, was a tiny black shape.

“What is it?” Lucy asked, shading her eyes. “Is it another boat?”

No one answered. Gradually, the shape grew as the *Gwyndemere* approached it, slowing almost imperceptibly. To James, it began to look like the top of a giant’s head, fringed with wild hair, peeking over the horizon. He watched, transfixed, as the shape finally resolved into the unmistakable outline of a tiny island, hardly bigger than the back garden of the Potter family home in Marble Arch. A narrow white beach ringed the island, embracing a growth of brush and wild grasses. In the center, half a dozen scrubby trees swayed ponderously. As the *Gwyndemere* slowed, coming within shouting distance of the tiny island, James was shocked to hear a voice cry out from the shadow of the trees.

“A ship!” the voice shouted. “Oh, thank heavens, a ship! At long last!”

A man stumbled out onto the beach and jumped up and down, waving a length of driftwood in his hand. The man was very thin and wildly bedraggled, his hair and beard grown to nearly comical proportions and his clothing bleached white.

“Hooray!” he shouted. “My messages in all those old bottles were not in vain! The seagulls laughed at me, they did! Told me it was foolish to hope, but I kept the faith! I knew someday my long, long sojourn would come to an—oh, it’s you,” he said, his voice dropping on the last three words.

“Ahoy, Roberts!” a sailor in the *Gwyndemere*’s crow’s nest called. “All’s clear along the span o’ the compass. Captain Ash Farragut requests landing.”

“Permission granted,” the erstwhile castaway called back grumpily, turning and walking back toward the trees. His voice carried easily over the lapping waves as he muttered, “Tells me all’s clear along the span o’ the compass. Like I ain’t been sittin’ here all day, keepin’ a lookout. S’m’y job, after all, isn’t it?” James watched with fascination as the bedraggled man stopped beneath one of the trees and tapped it with his driftwood walking stick. “Portmaster Roberts reporting the arrival of the *Gwyndemere*, Captain Farragut in command, with partial complement of travelers, goods, and cargo. Forty minutes late too, unless the sun’s a liar.”

“Ah, we’ve reached port,” a voice behind James said cheerfully. He glanced back to see his Uncle Percy dressed in a fancy traveling cloak and matching derby. “Aquapolis for the night, ladies and gentlemen. Last landfall ’til journey’s end. I’ll go tell the others.”

James glanced from his uncle to Ralph and Lucy. “Some ‘port’ this is. I’m not even sure we’ll all fit down there.”

“Yeah,” Ralph agreed. “If it’s all the same to everyone else, I think I’ll just stay here on the ship for the night.”

“Quite clever of the portmaster to play the part of a shipwreck survivor, though,” Lucy commented appreciatively. “Just in case any Muggle ships come in sight of the place.”

James looked back at the man on the shore, his brow furrowed. “How sure are you that he’s just playing the part?”

“Whoa,” Ralph said suddenly, grabbing onto the railing with one hand. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” James asked, and then gasped as he felt it too. The ship was shuddering very faintly, as if a thousand fists were pounding on the hull. A sound accompanied the sensation, a sort of low rumble, deep and huge.

“It’s all right,” Neville said, albeit rather nervously. “Somehow, I think this is supposed to happen.”

“It’s not just happening on the ship,” Lucy cried, pointing. “Look at the island!”

James looked. The leaves of the trees were shaking faintly. A large yellowish fruit fell from one of the trees and rolled to a stop on the white sand. Strangely, there seemed to be far more of the sand than there should have been. It was as if the beach was expanding around the island, growing, pushing back the waves. The man on the shore seemed to be completely unperturbed by the phenomenon. He ambled over to a large dark boulder, reached behind it and retrieved a clipboard, which he consulted critically.

“Behold,” Merlin proclaimed, raising his chin against the increasing wind. “The wonders of the lost city. Behold Aquapolis, grandest of the seven cities of the continent of Atlantis.”

Slowly, the island rose, pushed upwards by a great, dark shelf of stone. The foundation widened as it elevated, as if the island were merely the topmost peak of a huge undersea mountain. Water thundered down the faces of broad cliffs, coursing out of dozens of deep crags and caverns. James watched, dumbstruck, as the landmass grew, extending great rocky arms out to embrace the *Gwynndemere*, creating a bay around it. Regular shapes became visible as they pushed upwards through the waves: peaked roofs, domes, and spires first, and then monumental stone columns, arches, and colonnades. Soaring bridges and stairways crisscrossed the mountain, connecting the structures and enclosing walled courtyards, ancient statuary, and bright, colorful gardens of coral. Sunlight shimmered over the city as it revealed itself, reflecting as if from innumerable, enormous jewels. With a thrill of wonder, James realized that the shining shapes were not jewels, in fact, but glass windows and doors, fitted into exquisitely crafted coppery frameworks. The windows glittered like rainbows as the seawater coursed down them, glinting from every opening and doorway, from between every pillar and column, completely enclosing the city in rippling, briny brilliance.

“I’ve heard of this place,” Harry Potter said, placing a hand on his son’s shoulder, “but I never imagined it would be like this.”

“Are the other six cities of Atlantis like this too?” Ralph asked in an awed voice.

Merlin sighed somberly. “Alas, the Aquapolis is the lone survivor of the great Republic. The others have long since settled to their watery graves, having exhausted their magic as their

populations dwindled, drawn to the fixed lands. Such is the course of history. All great things, even the most wondrous, must meet their ends.”

“Did you see it?” Albus cried suddenly, grabbing James’ shoulder and shaking him enthusiastically. “Did you see it come up out of the water?”

“It was pretty hard to miss, Al,” James laughed, turning. “Where were you?”

“The first mate took me up to the pilothouse to watch!” Albus exclaimed, beside himself with excitement. “Me and Petra and Izzy. Mum and Lil too! It was bloody awesome!”

“Don’t say that word,” Ginny said mildly, following Albus across the deck with the others at her side. “But it was, really. I had no idea.”

“Well,” Harry announced grandly, turning to face the travelers, “all ashore who’s going ashore!”

James grinned and turned to look back at the great island again. Its countless windows sparkled gently as the sun lowered, painting the city bronze and gold. A crew of men in neat red tunics was piloting a ferry toward the *Gwyndemere*, apparently prepared to transport everyone aboard to their home for the night.

“It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?” Ginny said, sighing. “Almost makes the whole trip worthwhile.”

James smiled up at his mother. For the moment, not knowing yet what was still to come, he agreed with her completely.



James lay in his bed and stared up at the low ceiling, unable to sleep. The Aquapolis’ lodgings were clean, ornate, and well-maintained, but very, very old. The entire city, spectacular as it was, smelled vaguely damp, which was, of course, perfectly understandable. Uncle Percy, who apparently suffered from mold allergies, had had a rather difficult time of it, especially as evening had set and the city had once again sunk into its watery habitat. Eventually, Aunt Audrey had asked one of their Atlantean hosts, a pretty, plump young woman with thick black hair and olive skin, if Percy might be offered a particular brand of medicinal tea. The woman, whose name was Mila, had taken one look at Percy’s red nose and eyes, and returned minutes later with an empty cup and a small steaming pot. Upon drinking the pot’s contents, Percy no longer sneezed or sniffled, but had nevertheless remained in a rather irritable mood throughout the evening.

Merlin, as was usually the case, was treated with great fanfare upon his arrival in the city, even as he disembarked from the ferry with James and Ralph at his side. Men in long white robes and curiously carved staffs met them on the steps of the city's reception hall, which was hewn directly out of the stone of the mountain. While the city's leaders and Merlin exchanged formal greetings, Lucy and Albus had caught up to James and Ralph, and all four of them had stood looking about with undisguised wonder. Water still ran over the intricately patterned marble floor and dripped from the high vaulted ceilings, and James understood that the reception hall, grand as it was, was filled with seawater most of the time. A great stone column dominated the entryway to the space, topped with a monumental statue of a bearded wizard in flowing toga-like robes, a staff in his left hand and his right hand raised, pressed to the base of one of the ceiling's vaulted supports, as if he was holding it up.

"Soterios," Lucy had said, reading the inscription that wrapped around the base of the statue's column. "The Hero of Atlantis. He was the one that unified the wizarding populous of Atlantis and created the network of magic that kept the cities intact, even as their foundations eroded away. I read about him in the wizard library at home. 'Poios Idryma sozo para magica dia magikos'."

"What's it mean?" Albus had asked, walking around the column to read the inscription.

Izzy, Lily, and Petra had gotten off the ferry by then and joined the others near the base of the statue. Petra had peered at the ancient carved words. "It means, 'who saved the foundations of magic, by magic'."

"So," Ralph had said slowly, "this whole place is held together by, what...?"

Petra had shrugged. "The collective magical will of the witches and wizards who live here."

"Makes sense, really," Lucy had commented. "After all, the Greeks did invent the concept of democracy, which is really just the idea of the city being supported by the people who live in it. Granted, this takes it to a rather new level."

Ralph had shaken his head and looked around at the massive, dark ceilings. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm a little iffy about the idea of willpower as structural bedrock."

"That's because you're thinking of *your* willpower," Lucy had sniffed.

"It's held up for centuries, Ralph," Albus had said, shrugging. "What could happen?"

Ralph had glanced back at Albus, then at Merlin, who was still chatting with the Aquapolis elders some distance away. "I don't know," he'd replied. "Why don't you ask the *other* six cities of Atlantis?"

Later, as the sun had set on the horizon amidst a flaming cauldron of colorful clouds, an Atlantean elder named Atropos had taken the travelers on a tour of the city, leading them along broad, sweeping staircases and bridges, through enormous colonnades, past ornate oceanic gardens, statues and arches. Many of the city's myriad, enormous windows had been cranked open, letting in the cool, ocean breeze.

"The city has remained virtually unchanged since its descent into the depths," Atropos had explained. "When the waters began to rise, our ancestors had enough forewarning to design and construct a system of watertight crystal valves, which you see all around us. They are virtually

unbreakable, and are reinforced by a unique alchemy that makes them less brittle.” To illustrate, Atropos had approached one of the tall copper-framed windows that fitted between a set of herculean columns. He leaned on the crystal with one hand, and then gently applied his weight. Instead of breaking, the crystal bent slowly around his hand, almost like a very large, very thick soap bubble. Finally, Atropos’ hand had pushed entirely through. He’d wiggled his fingers in the dying sunlight on the other side of the crystal, smiling thinly back at his attendees. Merlin had nodded slowly, impressed.

“Remarkable,” Denniston Dolohov had enthused. “Tell me, is this proprietary magic? Or would the Atlanteans be willing to share it? I can think of dozens of security applications for such a thing.”

“Doesn’t he ever go off duty?” Aunt Audrey had muttered to her husband, who shushed her.

“That’s why he’s here, dearest,” he’d replied quietly. “His new post at the Ministry places him in charge of a whole new department of anti-Muggle defensive magic and technomancy. These are uncertain times, as you well know. And growing more uncertain every day.”

At that point, Percy had shared a meaningful glance with Neville Longbottom and James’ dad. Harry had shrugged slightly, raising his eyebrows and nodding toward Atropos, as if to say *not now*.

After a lavish dinner of strange, deep-sea fish and crustaceans, some of which were as large as hippogriffs and more bizarre than James was prepared to taste, the Aquapolis had sunk again. James, Ralph, and Lucy had watched from the broad crystal portals of a Parthenon-like structure built atop one of the island’s curving peninsulas. The sun had finally dipped beneath the rim of the horizon, leaving only a faint pinkish glow at the edge of the star-strewn sky. For a while, the *Gwyndemere* had been visible in the bay far below, rocking gently on its own reflection. Presently, the marble floor had begun to rumble beneath the observers’ feet and the bay had begun to rise, pushing up and out, slowly overtaking the Aquapolis’ lower reaches. Silently, water had poured into the reception hall, far below and halfway around the bowl of the great city. James had glimpsed the statue of Soterios, tiny with distance, as the ocean rushed around it, swallowing it up. As the island sank away, the *Gwyndemere* had risen higher and higher, until it was nearly eye-level with James, Ralph, and Lucy where they watched, breathlessly. The pink light of the dying sun had painted the ship on one side while the faint blue glow of the new moon lit the other. And then, so suddenly that it had made all three students jump back in alarm, water had rushed up over the crystal window before them, swallowing it with a dull, thunderous roar. After that, there was only the dim, featureless blue of the depths, punctuated, faintly, by pinpricks of light that glowed from the submerged city.

It had been wondrous, in a grave, solemn sort of way.

Now, as night enveloped the city and everyone, including James’ parents and sister in the next room, had gone to bed, James lay awake, alert and restless. Lantern light seeped beneath the door from the corridor beyond. James’ eyes had grown used to it so that he could easily see the ancient, cracked fresco painted onto the ceiling. In it, a man in a short tunic and a sort of leafy crown was wrestling a giant octopus, clutching four of its tentacles beneath his muscled arm and stunning it with the staff in his other hand. To James, it didn’t look like a fair fight. He found himself rooting for the octopus.

It had been a very strange summer. The surprise arrival of Petra and Izzy had, of course, caused quite a stir. It had happened mere weeks after the last day of school, and James had only just begun to get comfortable with the fact that Petra had graduated and would not be showing up in the Gryffindor common room next term. It was a shame, he told himself, because he had finally admitted to himself that he did, in fact, feel something stronger for Petra than mere friendship. Apparently, everyone else had seen it before he had, including his own mum, who had made some fairly embarrassing comments about it in the wake of the school play. Despite the fact that the event had ended in a disastrous uproar, James had spent more than a few wistful moments remembering the fact that the play, *The Triumvirate*, had required he and Petra to play the parts of doomed lovers. He was still young enough to think that that pairing had been ripe with cosmic significance, and had secretly (so secretly that he himself had barely even known it) hoped that Petra would recognize it as well.

She had not, of course.

At first, James had believed that this was because Petra was still in love with her former beau, Ted Lupin. Later, however, he'd realized that Petra had been under the influence of a secret, awful curse. Due to a series of very wicked schemes, set in motion by none other than the long dead Dark Lord himself, Petra Morganstern was the living carrier of that villain's last, ghostly shred of soul. It had been imparted to her while she was still in her mother's womb, transmitted via a special, nearly unheard-of bit of cruel, dark magic: a special kind of Horcrux, in the shape of an ugly silver dagger.

James' dad had done some research on it, with the help of Aunt Hermione, and had discovered that such a thing was called a 'transcendent Horcrux'. They'd only found one reference to it, in a book so dark and treacherous that James' dad and Uncle Ron had had to bolt it to the table with silver stakes to keep it from snapping their hands off. According to their awed, whispered conversations (which James and Albus had surreptitiously listened in on), a transcendent Horcrux was purely theoretical; no one, at the time of the book's writing, had ever succeeded in actually creating one. Unlike other Horcruxes, a transcendent Horcrux could never be used to restore the bit of soul it contained to its original host. If such a thing were attempted, it would act as a kind of poison, killing every other bit of the soul it had been sheared from, regardless of how many normal Horcruxes were in use. The shred of preserved soul in a transcendent Horcrux had to be passed on to *another* host, accepted willingly, there to spread its influence and live on, leech-like.

Petra's mother had been tricked into transmuting the curse of Voldemort's soul into her unborn baby, but that didn't make James hate her any less. As far as he was concerned, the woman had to have been either stupid, gullible, or blind. Miraculously, however, Petra herself loved her long dead mother, loved her and missed her enough to have nearly doomed all of mankind in the hopes of somehow bringing her back to life. In the end, fortunately, Petra herself had been stronger and smarter than her mother had been, and she had made the right choice—the hard choice. She had rejected the deal offered to her by the otherworldly beast called the Gatekeeper, even though it had meant the loss of the one thing she'd most wanted in all the world: the return of her dead parents.

Not very surprisingly, the realization of all of these things had not in the least diminished James' fascination with the young witch. If anything, it had increased it. James himself had confronted the Gatekeeper, and knew the awful stresses Petra had to have endured in rejecting its

tantalizing offer. Furthermore, there was just something about Petra, something about the reality of her internal struggles and her painful, personal losses, that made James want to be brave for her.

In his most secret heart, she awoke a deep, pervasive sense of manly nobility. He wanted to defend her, to slay her dragons, to be her knightly savior. Of course, he told no one about these feelings. He was sheepish about admitting them even to himself. In the light of day, his infatuation with her seemed silly, childish, quaintly preposterous. She was of age, for one thing, graduated and free, a young woman moving out into a grownup's world, while he was still a month shy of fourteen. Still, the feelings clung to him, as did his affection for her. Without even trying, she had smitten him. Fortunately, as the summer had progressed, absence and distance had helped James begin to forget the girl who had occupied so much of his attention during the previous school year. Such, he thought (rather wisely for his age), was the nature of young love.

And then, to his mingled dismay and delight, Petra and Izzy had arrived at the Potter family home, escorted by Ted Lupin, Damien Damascus, and Sabrina Hildegard. There had been much curiosity about what had brought them there, but very few questions, at least at first. It was apparent that something awful had happened, something that had resulted in the deaths of both Petra's grandfather and his horrible wife, Phyllis, Izzy's mother. Ted, Damien, and Sabrina had kept quiet about whatever they had seen at Morganstern Farm, apparently believing it was Petra's tale to tell (and later because Merlin had apparently sworn them to secrecy). Ted had, however, taken James' dad and mum aside and asked if it would be all right if Petra and Izzy stayed at the Potter home until things settled down. This had been agreed to quickly and with very little fuss, so that by that very evening, James had found himself going to bed only one wall removed from the girl who, completely and inexplicably, commanded his every affection.

He'd lain awake that night and listened to the soft footsteps and murmured voices in the next room, wondering what it all meant, if anything; wondering if there was something he could do, some way to salvage the bravery he'd felt only days before, when he'd told himself that if Petra *had* been coming back to Hogwarts the next term, he would have told her exactly how he felt about her, and done whatever was necessary to inspire the same in her.

He lay awake now as he had then, staring up at the fresco of the Atlantean warrior wrestling the unfortunate octopus, and wondered much the same things. Petra had accompanied the Potters on their trip across the ocean, apparently intending to seek employment at the school James would be attending during their stay. Considering her intellect and her uncanny magical skills, James thought it very likely that she would get any job she applied for. In short, Petra's life seemed, even now, to be mysteriously intertwined with his own. It was like the play, *The Triumvirate*, all over again, like their fleeting, staged kiss at the end, the one that should have ended so wonderfully, and had instead ended with chaos and near tragedy. The mingled hope and fear filled James with a queer, intense range of emotions.

And on the heels of that, James was reminded of the odd, creepy words that Professor Trelawney had uttered to him early that very morning. The professor was, of course, a few octocards shy of a full deck. Hardly anyone believed her proclamations and visions. And yet, what James had heard and witnessed in the corridor with her that morning had been dramatically different than anything he'd ever seen in her class. It had seemed all too real, all too certain. But what had any of it

meant? James didn't know, but maybe Lucy would. She was smart about such things, remarkably pragmatic and clearheaded. He made a mental note to ask her about it during their voyage.

As James stared up at the fresco over his head, a soft noise caught his attention, coming from the corridor outside his room. A shadow obscured the ceiling fresco for a moment and James glanced down toward the bar of light beneath the heavy door of his room. The unmistakable silhouette of a pair of walking feet passed by. James frowned curiously.

"Hey Al," he whispered. "You awake?"

"Mrrmmm," Albus declared from the other side of the narrow room, rolling over.

James considered waking his brother, even got out of his own bed and reached to shake him, but then he thought better of it. Holding his breath, he approached the door, thumbed the latch, and pulled it open as quietly as he could.

There didn't seem to be anyone in the corridor. Lantern light flickered silently, reflecting on the tiled marble floors and white walls. Leaving the door slightly open, James padded along the corridor in the direction that the shadowy figure seemed to have gone. He reached the end of the corridor and entered a larger hallway lined with statuary and doorways on one side and tall crystal windows, interspersed with pillars, on the other.

Beyond the windows, the city seemed very dark in its watery bed. Only a few lights could be seen glimmering in the blue distance. Under a glass-enclosed bridge, a whale maneuvered deftly, its bulk black in the dimness, its tail waving ponderously. James saw his own reflection in the crystal; saw his tee shirt, pyjama bottoms, and bare feet. His hair, as usual, was stuck up in a wild stew. He frowned at himself, even though he liked what he saw. He was getting taller, was, in fact, nearly as tall as his mum now. "You could pass for a seventh-year," she had told him recently, before they'd known they would be spending the year away from Hogwarts, in an entirely different country. "You've gone and turned into a man," she'd said, smiling indulgently and a little mistily, "and I barely noticed it happening. Albus and Lily too, but especially you. You're growing up. You're becoming your own man."

James sighed, wishing his mother had been right. He didn't feel like his own man, at least not yet. But he was getting there. The past two years had made their mark, as had his recent ordeal with the Gatekeeper, which had, very fortunately, ended with its eternal banishment. James didn't yet feel like a man, but he could sense the essential framework of his manhood taking shape inside him, defining who he was going to be, giving him hope and a fleeting, giddy strength. Maybe Scorpius had been right. Maybe there would be another adventure in the offing this year. If there was, and if James was going to be a part of it, he thought that he might just be ready for it. This time, he wouldn't stumble into it filled with uncertainty and self-doubt. This time, he thought, grinning to himself, he'd face it head on.

"So very like your grandfather," a voice said quietly, smiling. James startled and whipped around, looking for the source of the voice. A tall figure stood next to him, staring out the crystalline window, its robes so seamlessly black that they cast no reflection on the mirror-like surface.

"Sorry," James said quickly, his eyes wide. "I didn't hear you, er... how long have you been there?"

“You are growing bold,” the figure said, and James realized it was a woman. Her voice was pleasant, friendly. “Bold and confident, James Sirius Potter, nor does this come as a surprise to anyone who might be paying the slightest bit of attention. It is, in fact, exactly as it should be.”

James peered at the woman, trying to see her face under the thick hood that covered her head. “Thanks, I guess. How do you know me?” he asked.

She noticed his look and laughed lightly. “I am a fellow traveler, James. Didn’t you see me aboard the *Gwyndemere*?”

James thought for a moment. “No, actually. Sorry. And I expect I’d have remembered you, to be honest. Were you wearing... er... that?”

“People tend not to notice me, believe it or not,” the woman sighed. “Unless they want to, or unless I make them. But I apologize. We were talking about you, weren’t we?”

“I guess so,” James replied, taking a step back. He felt a little strange standing in the empty corridor with the woman, especially since she seemed to be fully dressed and he was in his bedclothes, his hair teased into corkscrews. He reached up and matted it down as unobtrusively as he could. “But like I said, how do you know about me? Who are you?”

“Oh, everyone knows you,” the woman said, her voice smiling. “Everyone in the wizarding world, at least. Son of the great Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, et cetera, et cetera. Why, you’ve spent so very much time wondering how you should and shouldn’t be like your father that you’ve completely failed to see all the ways—the far more *important* ways—that you are like your namesake, your grandfather, James Potter the First.”

James glanced from the darkly clothed woman next to him to his own reflection in the crystal glass. Strange as it seemed, the woman was right. It had never occurred to him to wonder about his grandfather on his dad’s side, to wonder if he himself bore any of that man’s personality traits or physical attributes. Everyone said that Albus was the one who most looked like the young Harry Potter. Maybe James had, therefore, inherited the looks and personality of his long lost grandfather. It wouldn’t be all that surprising, really. Truthfully, it was quite a nice thought. He shrugged at his reflected self, musing.

“Did you know my grandfather?” he asked the robed woman. “James the First?” As soon as he’d asked it, he felt foolish for doing so. The woman couldn’t possibly be that old.

“Not as such,” the woman answered, a laugh in her voice. “I am rather a student of history, that’s all. You Potters are quite famous, as I have already mentioned, and your family name has a long and rich ancestry, dating back more than a thousand years. You may be interested to know that your experience with Merlinus Ambrosius is not the first time the Potter name has been historically linked to the great sorcerer. He saved the life of a distant relative of yours, in fact, albeit indirectly.”

“Really?” James asked, glancing back at the woman again. Her face was still hidden, lost in shadow. “When? How?”

“A story for another time, I think,” the woman demurred. “For now, I think I will be on my way. I was simply entranced by the view here. A city buried underwater is truly a spectacular sight. You might say that it appeals to me, in a rather deep, elemental way.”

“Yeah,” James said, sighing. “Me too, I suppose. But I should probably get back to my own room. I couldn’t sleep. I was just too excited.”

“Indeed,” the woman nodded, her voice teasing. “That sort of thing seems to be rather common this night. Your friend is also up and wandering. But of course, you must already know that. You are probably planning to meet her.” She exhaled slowly, wistfully. “Ah, young love...”

“Who?” James asked, frowning, but of course he knew the answer already. “Petra?”

“I’m sure I don’t know her name,” the woman answered tactfully, but her hooded head turned, gesturing toward the deserted hall behind James. She nodded, as if prodding him in the right direction. James finally had a glimpse of the woman’s face. She was pretty, and younger than he had expected. A curl of reddish hair lay on her forehead like a comma.

“Sure,” James nodded. “I should probably go and... er... check on her. If she’s part of my group, like you said.”

The woman nodded again, her red lips smiling knowingly. James’ face flushed, partly because what she was implying—that he was sneaking off to meet a girlfriend for some unchaperoned snogging—was so untrue, and partly because he so terribly wished it was.

“Good night, James,” the woman said, turning away. “Sleep well.”

“Good night, er,” he replied, but he didn’t know the woman’s name. She swept on, leaving a deep shadow behind her and no reflection on the crystal windows. James frowned at her as she departed. Then, remembering what she had said, he turned and ran along the hall in the other direction.

Closed doors and crystal panels lined the hall for some distance, and then the hall widened, enclosing a large space with a dizzyingly high, dark ceiling. An ornate brass framework of crystal windows embraced one side of the space, forming shining buttresses and terraces, filled with ferns. The floor was checkered marble, each square as large as James’ parents’ bed. The space appeared to be a sort of common room, full of chairs, sofas, tables, and desks. A massive silver chandelier hung over the room, dominating it, but its hundreds of candles were dark. The only light in the room came from a long low fireplace and a cluster of candles that stood near it on a brass brazier. James began to cross the floor slowly, threading between the low chairs and desks, instinctively feeling that he should be very quiet. Before he was halfway to the fireplace, however, he spied a figure lying serenely on a sort of half sofa. She sat up at his approach, apparently unsurprised, and James saw that it was Izzy.

“Hi James,” she said quietly. “What’re you up to?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” he replied, matching her tone of voice. “I saw someone’s shadow go by and came out to see who else was up.”

Izzy nodded. “It was probably me and Morgan. That’s Petra, you know. I call her Morgan sometimes still because I was there when she changed her name. I changed mine too, but I couldn’t make it stick. Hers fits her, though, even though she says that everybody else can still call her by her old name.”

James nodded a little uncertainly. “I see... er,” he said. “Anyway, why are you both up, then?”

“Just like you,” Izzy replied. “We couldn’t sleep either. Petra especially, I think. She has dreams. They make her feel a little crazy,” she said, whispering the last part.

James sat down on the end of the chaise as Izzy curled her feet under her. He peered over toward the fireplace. “What do you mean they make her feel crazy?”

Izzy nodded her head back and forth and shrugged. “I don’t understand any of it. I don’t think they’re regular dreams. She says she feels them even when she’s awake. She says they make her forget what really happened, the last day we were back home, on Papa Warren’s farm.”

James wanted to ask what *had* happened that day, but thought he probably shouldn’t. Instead, he asked, “Do you think she’s all right?”

“No,” Izzy answered, sighing and peering back over her shoulder, toward the fireplace. “But it’ll be all right in the end. She says we just need to get away from everything. That’s why we’re going all the way across the ocean. I think she’s hoping that the dreams won’t be able to find her there.”

James followed Izzy’s gaze and finally saw Petra, seated at a low desk near the fire, her back to them. “What do you think, Izzy?” he asked, not taking his eyes from Petra’s silhouette where she sat bent over the desk. “Do you think it’ll work?”

Izzy shook her head, making her blonde curls swing. “No, it won’t work. Don’t tell Morgan—*Petra*—that I said that, though, all right? I don’t think her dreams are going to go away. I think they’re going to get worse. Until it’s all over, at least.”

“How do you know, Iz? When will it be over?”

The girl shrugged again. “Headmaster Merlin says that she has to find out where the dreams are really coming from. He told her to chase them. That’s what she’s doing now. She’s *chasing* them. It works best right when it happens, right when they wake her up.”

James studied Petra, saw that she was engaged in some intense activity, bent over the desk so severely that she appeared to be wrestling with it. “What’s she doing?” he asked very quietly. “I mean, how does she chase a dream?”

“She’s writing it,” Izzy said simply. “Like a story. She’s good at that. She used to tell me stories all the time, when it was nights out. She’d make them all up in her head, and a lot of them were better than the stories she read to me in the books. Me and Beatrice and all the rest of my dolls all listened. It was our most favorite thing.”

James could see it now that Izzy had told him what Petra was doing. Her elbow moved slightly, and a quill wavered in the air over her shoulder, silhouetted in the darkness.

“Does she read the dream to you, Iz?”

“Oh no,” the girl answered quickly, obviously disinterested. “I don’t want to hear them. They’re nasty. I don’t want to ever think about any of that ever again. It scares me too much. And it makes me sad. I miss my mother, sometimes, and I cry, and Petra doesn’t know what to do. I never want to hear those stories.”

James looked back at Izzy, frowning thoughtfully. “Then why do you come along when she chases the dream? Are you standing guard?”

Izzy nodded. “Yes, that’s what Petra says, but I think there’s another reason, maybe. I think she asks me to come because she needs me here to prove that the dreams aren’t true.” She sighed again, in a quick, businesslike manner, and looked at James. “She needs me here to prove that I’m still alive.”

James’ eyes widened. *What in the world did that mean?* He opened his mouth to ask, but a shadow moved nearby. He glanced up and saw Petra approaching, shaking her right hand as if to loosen the kinks from her fingers.

“Hi James,” she said, smiling tiredly. “I see you haven’t given up skulking around at night, Invisibility Cloak or not.”

“Yeah,” James said, his face reddening. “I couldn’t sleep. Are you, you know, all right and everything?”

“I’m fine,” Petra lied, glancing away. James saw that she had her knapsack in her left hand, partly unzipped. A sheaf of loose parchment lay inside. “Izzy probably told you what I was doing. I just have some things to work out, that’s all.”

“Izzy said it’s a bad dream,” James said, standing. “Is that really all it is?”

Petra looked back at him. In the darkness, James couldn’t read her expression. He went on quickly, “I mean, you don’t have to tell me or anything. It’s just, you know, I was there. I remember what happened that night in the Chamber of Secrets and everything, and I had my own run-in with the Gatekeeper. I know what you’re going through, sort of. If you, I don’t know, wanted to, er, talk about it. Or whatever.”

Suddenly, helplessly, Petra laughed. She shook her head wonderingly and pushed her hair out of her face. “James, you are very sweet. I’m glad you’re here, and not just for the reasons you said. Me and Izzy both, we owe you and your family a lot. I don’t know what we’d have done without the lot of you. But you, especially. You make me feel better. Do you know that? You make me laugh. Lately, that’s a very rare thing. Walk with us, won’t you?”

James could feel the heat beating off his face as the blood rushed to his cheeks. He was glad it was very dark in the room. “Sure,” he said, pushing himself to his full height. “I was just checking on you. Some lady in black robes told me where you’d gone. You probably saw her already.”

“I didn’t,” Petra answered, sighing. “Did you, Iz?”

“I only saw that man sleeping by the statue near our rooms. I think he’s a lantern lighter, fell straight to sleep while out doing his job. He snored really loud, and it echoed. Remember that?” She giggled.

“I remember,” Petra said, smiling.

“So,” James began, feeling a little bold, “how did it go?”

Petra walked slowly along the hall, watching the murky view beyond the crystal. “How did what go?”

“The, er, dream chasing. Izzy mentioned it. She said you were writing it down. Like a story.”

Petra nodded. "Headmaster Merlin told me I should try it. I didn't want to, but... it helps. A little." She touched Izzy's head lightly, resting her hand on the girl's blonde hair. "It isn't a very nice story though. It's rather horrid."

"I... I could read it, if you wanted," James said, studying the floor furiously as he walked. "If you thought it might help."

Petra was silent, and James was suddenly worried that he had offended her. He glanced aside at her, but she was looking thoughtful, her eyes half-lidded. "Perhaps," she finally said, "you may be right, James. Maybe that would weaken it. Like Izzy probably told you, it's... more than just a dream. It's like a certainty. Like a memory of something that didn't really happen, or happened very differently. I can't shake it off. It haunts me."

James nodded and willed himself not to say anymore. Silently, the three walked on, finally coming to the lantern-lit corridor where James had begun. He saw the door to his room, still standing slightly open.

"We can find our way from here," Petra whispered.

"We're just around the corner and down the stairs," Izzy added, pointing. "Past the man sleeping with the lantern wand in his hand. You want to come and hear his snore? It's funny. It sounds like this," Suddenly, loudly, Izzy snorted, making a comical imitation of a snore.

"Shh! Iz!" Petra rasped, stifling a laugh and covering her sister's mouth with her hand. "People are sleeping!"

"I know!" the girl whispered, pushing Petra's hand away. "And that's what they sound like!"

Petra shook her head at James, still trying not to laugh. James grinned at her.

"Good night, James," she said quietly. "Thanks for checking on us. Thanks for walking us back. Maybe I *will* let you read the dream. If you really want to. I think you'd probably understand it better than anyone else, for all the reasons you mentioned back in the hall. If you think you are up to it, that is."

James nodded soberly. "Definitely. If you think it will help. Besides, I'm... I'm curious."

Petra studied his face for a long moment, biting the corner of her lip. Finally, she hefted her knapsack, reaching inside, and produced a thin sheaf of parchments. Wordlessly, she handed them over to him.

"It's not a nice story," she said again. "And it won't make a lot of sense. I can tell you the rest, if you want. Later. I need to tell *someone*, I think. It's just too big a secret for... well, for Izzy and me. Do you agree, Iz?"

The blonde girl screwed up her face thoughtfully. She shrugged.

"It's all right, either way," James said, taking the parchments. There were about four pages, covered with Petra's neat, small handwriting. Suddenly, he felt strange about the offer. "Are you sure? You don't have to, if you don't want to."

"I *do* want to," Petra said, sighing again. "But you can't tell anyone, all right? Not any of it. I swear, if you do..."

James shook his head vigorously. "I won't! I promise! Pinky promise, even!"

Petra blinked at him, and then laughed again. "All right, I believe you. Thanks, James. See you in the morning. We still have a long way to go, don't we?"

James nodded. "Good night, Petra. Night, Iz."

The girls turned and continued down the hall, Petra's hand on her sister's shoulder. James looked down at the small stack of parchment in his hands, barely believing what had happened. He felt both giddy and dreadfully nervous about it. He wanted to read Petra's dream story, wanted to read it that very moment, standing in the dim light of the Atlantean corridor, and yet he was strangely afraid to do so. What if it was as awful as Petra said it was? Nothing, he felt quite sure, could change the way he felt about her (whether he liked it or not) and yet...

Finally, he turned and pushed the door of his room open, letting himself into the darkness inside. He passed the shape of his sleeping brother and crept toward the table next to his bed, where his duffle bag lay, unzipped. He rooted in the bag for a moment until he found his wand. Glancing around, he laid Petra's story on the bed and pointed his wand at it.

"*Velierus*," he said, as quietly as he could. A tiny burst of blue light illuminated the bed, and the parchments folded together, doubling over repeatedly until all that remained was a thick packet, no bigger than an auger. It was totally seamless, as if it was encased in a perfect sphere of parchment. Kneeling, James hid both his wand and the secret package in the bottom of his bag. A moment later, he threw himself onto the bed and pulled the covers up to his chin.

He would read Petra's dream story soon. Until then, he relished the idea that she had chosen him, and him alone, to share it with. He had suggested it, of course, but the fact remained that she had accepted his offer. She trusted him. She was glad of his presence. And what else had she said? He made her laugh. James' cousin Lucy had said the same thing to him once, last year, after Granddad's funeral, but it seemed so much more meaningful, so much more *portentous*, when Petra said it. He sighed, remembering the sound of her voice, the pleasing music of her laughter, sad and weary as it may have been.

*It doesn't mean anything*, he told himself, but they were only words, and his heart didn't believe them. Secretly, his heart rejoiced. Eventually, smiling faintly, he slept.

### *And thus ends chapter two! What did you think?*

Tomorrow's chapter will be released at noon, CST, via [www.jamespotterseries.com](http://www.jamespotterseries.com). In the meantime, come on over to the [Grotto Keep forum](#) to discuss what's happened thus far! Speculations, cogitations, and ruminations galore.

Remember, if you are remotely interested in reading Petra's complete back story spoiler-free, seek yourself a copy of "The Girl on the Dock" before the next few chapters. Check out [www.girlonthedock.com](http://www.girlonthedock.com) for details.