



3. EIGHTY-EIGHT KNOTS

The next morning, as James and his family and friends made their way to breakfast, they were greeted by a spectacular sight. The view beyond the submerged city's crystal enclosures was a green-gold vista, filled with shimmering beams of dawn sunlight, gently streaming rafts of bubbles, and schools of silvery fish, all of which played over and around the glittering Atlantean cityscape.

James, Albus, and Lucy gazed with rapt curiosity as several strange shapes moved slowly through the water, angling back and forth between the distant ocean surface. The shapes were rather like long mirrored bubbles, some as large as a city bus, and all rippling in the faint Atlantic currents. Far below these, along the city's sloping, rocky foothills, James spied the unique patterns of sprawling oceanic gardens. Streaming leaves of kelp and neat rows of sea cucumbers grew alongside fields of far stranger and more colorful fruits and vegetables. Giant octopuses moved slowly through the gardens, and Lucy was the first to notice that they were being ridden upon by Atlantean farmers, their chests bare and their heads encased in glittering copper and crystal helmets.

As the students watched, the octopuses used their long agile arms to harvest some of the fields, and to tend to others, weeding or pruning them. One of the octopuses suddenly spread all of its arms and then contracted them together, shooting forward like a lithe torpedo. It rose up into the city swiftly, propelled by its powerful tentacles, and Albus gasped and pointed, laughing out loud; one of the Atlantean farmers was being towed behind the octopus, tethered to it by a long length of

cord and standing on a sort of rounded board, which he used like a fin to steer and bob through the currents. As the pair rose into the city, chased by their shadow, James couldn't help thinking that both the octopus and the rider seemed to be having a grand time of it. Swiftly, the octopus banked and spun, following the contours of the streets and streaming under bridges and walkways, until it roared directly in front of the window, a long dark shape against the brilliant beams of watery sunlight. The Atlantean farmer passed by a split second later, his legs flexing as he carved the currents with his bullet-like board.

"I wonder where he's going?" Albus asked, trying to peer up past the angle of the window.

"Probably bringing us our breakfast," his mum replied, gently pushing him onward. "If we don't hurry, we won't have time to eat it. We cast off in less than an hour."

A short while later, after a light breakfast of kippers and toast, the troop made their way toward a section of the city that Merlin referred to as the Aquapolis Major Moonpool. James didn't know what to expect, but was delighted and curious to find, upon their arrival, a massive amphitheater-like room which surrounded a huge dark pool of ocean water. Busy Atlantean witches and wizards milled on the circular terraces and steep staircases that surrounded the pool, which bobbed with all manner of boats.

"Looks like King's Cross on a Monday morning," James heard Denniston Dolohov comment, laughing.

"I don't expect that's too far from the truth, either," Neville Longbottom replied.

As the travelers made their way down toward the pool, James watched Atlantean conductors directing bits of the crowd this way and that, threading them along floating gangplanks and onto the decks of long narrow boats. The boats were wooden, decorated fore and aft with large carved curlicues. Men dressed in bright red tunics and high, fin-shaped caps stood on the sterns of the boats, next to the rudder lever, reading newspapers or consulting schedules as the ornately crafted benches filled before them.

A chime rang out in the bowl of the room, overriding the babble of voices. It was followed by an echoing female voice. "All commuters destined for Conch Corners and the Octodome, your skiff is departing now. Please stand clear of the descending bubble, in three, two..."

James glanced up as a gust of air pounded through the space from above, rippling through the commuters' robes and Merlin's long beard. The round, crystal skylight in the center of the ceiling bulged downwards at the force of the gust. The window elongated, trembled, and popped free, forming a monstrous, rainbow-streaked bubble. The bubble dropped precipitously onto one of the long boats, enveloping it, and then sank away into the depths, taking the boat with it. Amazingly, none of the gathered throng seemed alarmed or even to have noticed what had happened.

"I did some reading on this last night," Lucy said faintly, looking at the domed ceiling. "In the Atlantean Library. It's sort of a wonder of the world, you know, second only to the great library at Alexandria."

“Fascinating,” Albus said. “You know how interested we all are in libraries, but maybe you can get to the bit about the giant doom bubbles swallowing up ships.”

“Well, I’m making some guesses here,” Lucy replied, following as the troop threaded onto a narrow gangplank, “but the entire continent of Atlantis has volcanic origins. Unfortunately, the volcanoes that created the continent are what ended up destroying it, breaking it up and stripping away all of its foundations. The Atlanteans harnessed the power of the volcanoes, though, and used their vents to power their industry. I would guess that that’s what’s behind all of this.”

“What do you mean?” Ralph asked, stepping, somewhat reluctantly, onto the deck of one of the narrow boats, which was about the size of the Knight Bus. The boat captain stood in his red tunic and funny hat, scowling at a series of copper gauges installed on a post near the rudder lever.

“I suspect that those big gusts of air are volcanic exhaust,” Lucy frowned thoughtfully. “And this pool is probably part of the subterranean vent system.”

“No fears, everyone,” Percy said cheerfully, leading Molly and Audrey to one of the benches near the front of the boat. “But do strap in and hold tight. I’ve heard this can be quite a ride.”

“The famed Aquapolis Transit Authority,” Harry said, seating himself between Ginny and Lily. “The scheduling and dispatching model for the entire wizarding world. Percy’s right. Strap in and hold onto your bags, everyone.”

Albus glanced at James with an expression of mingled excitement and trepidation.

“So what’s it do?” Ralph asked. “I haven’t had the greatest luck with wizarding transportation systems.”

“There’s no way to explain it properly before we leave, Ralph,” Petra answered, buckling the copper clasps of her safety belt and helping Izzy with hers. “One word of advice before we go though.”

Ralph looked at her a bit helplessly. “What’s that?”

“Swallow your gum.”

Another chime rang through the crowded space. James looked around at the bobbing boats, the floating gangplanks, the throngs of busy Atlantean commuters on the terraces above, and grinned with nervous anticipation. Once again, the female voice rang out.

“All commuters destined for the surface and launch points beyond, your skiff is departing now. Please stand clear of the descending bubble, in three, two…”

As one, the travelers looked up. High above, the bubble ceiling bulged downwards, pushed by a blast of warm, vaguely sulfur-scented air. The bubble expanded, broke away, and dropped onto them. James couldn’t help ducking and covering his head. A sudden burst of pressure popped his ears and he felt the boat drop away beneath him as the bubble distorted the surface of the water, turning it concave. And then, with a dull, gurgling roar, the bubble dropped into darkness, taking the boat, and all those aboard, down with it.

Green darkness surrounded the boat. James drew a breath to comment on it, but a sudden explosion of velocity forced the air right back out of his lungs. Inertia pushed him back into his seat like a giant, soft hand. The ship's captain clung to the rudder lever as the bubble carried the craft forward, sucked into a tube of rough, dark rock. The noise of the journey was a dull thunder, pushing on James' ears like cotton batting. He turned to look at Albus and then Ralph, both of whom were staring with wide eyes, Albus in delight, Ralph with green-faced terror. In front of them, Petra had her arm around Izzy, who was looking around with undisguised wonder. To James' complete amazement, the rest of the travelers (his family and Merlin excluded) were completely ignoring the dark view that rushed around them. Most of the Atlanteans had their noses buried in books and small scrolls or were busily tapping notes onto tablets with glimmering, enchanted chisels. One of them, a man with a long gray beard and red leather sandals on his feet, was sprawled on a corner bench, dozing.

In the darkness far ahead of the boat, a glimmer of purple light appeared. It grew with shocking speed, and James craned in his seat to watch it flash past. The purple glow formed very angular words, which shone brightly in the darkness: '*PHEBES-DUOPHENES*'. A glowing arrow pointed downwards, toward an enormous copper-framed valve, which snapped open as the ship passed it. In the darkness behind, another bubble ship shot into the open valve, which winked shut again with a barely audible clang.

While turned around in his seat, James saw that the job of the captain was not so much to steer the ship as it was to angle it up the sides of the bubble as it shot around curves, thereby conserving the monumental centrifugal forces and keeping the passengers more or less in their seats. In the darkness it was hard to tell, but James had a sense that much of the time, the boat was sideways, or even upside-down, carried full circle around the circumference of the bubble as it rocketed through the curving vent tunnels. More copper-valved exits flashed past, listing off districts of the city.

There was one harrowing moment when another larger bubble ship appeared in the tunnel before them, moving much more slowly, and James was certain that their smaller boat was going to ram into it. The captain twitched the rudder lever deftly, however, and James felt their boat revolve swiftly up, changing their inertia just enough to push the bubble over the larger boat. For one bizarre moment, James and his companions found themselves upside-down, looking *up* on the larger boat as it passed beneath them. The captain of the larger boat tipped a quick salute to the captain in the smaller boat as it roared fleetingly overhead.

Finally, a much larger valve appeared in the dark distance, enclosing what appeared to be the end of the tunnel. The glowing purple letters over it read: '*SURFACE AND ALL POINTS NORTH*'.

"Be prepared for sudden stops," the captain bellowed in a clipped monotone. James gripped his seat and gritted his teeth.

The bubble ship shot through the valve and into blinding golden light. Instantly, the ship lost almost all of its momentum and dragged to a near halt. James felt the safety belt pinch his

middle as inertia threw him forward. A second later, the force broke and he flopped backwards against the bench, his hair flying. He looked around dazedly.

Petra ran a hand through her hair and smiled down at Izzy, who clapped her hands in delight.

“That was excellent!” Albus cried.

Lucy smoothed her blouse and looked aside. “How are you doing, Ralph?”

Ralph blinked. “You know,” he mused, “I think I was too startled to realize I should be sick.”

James craned to look behind him again. The bubble ship was still underwater, moving up and away from the submerged city. Even now, the sprawling Aquapolis was growing faint in the shimmering distance. James understood now what the mysterious shapes were that he had seen earlier that morning, the mirrored bubbles that had moved ponderously back and forth between the city and the ocean’s surface. He and his fellow travelers were inside one of them now.

“I think I could live here,” he murmured, turning back around in his seat.

“Ugh, not me,” his cousin Molly replied from a few benches away, seated between Aunt Audrey and Uncle Percy. “Too cold and dark.”

“That’s what makes it so cool,” Albus argued. “It reminds me of the Slytherin dungeons under the lake.”

James felt a small pang at that, remembering once again that they had all left Hogwarts behind them for the year, but he pushed the feeling away. The experience of the bubble ship was too cool to ruin with depressing thoughts about what he might be missing back home. Besides, he reminded himself, Rose, Louis, Hugo, and all the rest were probably just now settling into one of Professor Binns’ long incomprehensible lectures or a dull study period in the library, under the strict supervision of Professor Knossus Shert. If they knew what James and his fellow travelers had just experienced, they would likely be sick with envy—even Scorpius, although he would probably hide it well. This made James grin.

He looked up as the bubble ship rose into daylight. The surface rippled overhead like a living mosaic, its facets casting the sunlight into wild, golden prisms. Finally, the ship heaved onto the waves, where it splashed down gently and bobbed, still glimmering in its long mysterious bubble. The *Gwyndemere* stood some distance away, rocking on the waves, sunlight sparkling from its brass fixtures.

“Hup, hup, everyone,” Percy called, collecting his overnight bag and standing up. “Let us be off.” With his bag dangling from his hand, he extended one arm to Molly and the other to Lucy. She sidled out of her seat and approached her father, threading her arm into the crook of his elbow.

“See you on board,” she called back. A moment later, there was a loud, flat *crack* in the enclosed air of the bubble, and the three had disappeared.

Ralph looked confused. “Why couldn’t we just Disapparate from the city, if that’s how we’re getting on board the boat?”

“Apparating through water is extremely tricky business, Mr. Deedle,” Merlin answered, beckoning him over. “Especially onto a moving ship. Besides, we would have missed that wonderful tube ride, wouldn’t we have?”

“Come on!” James grinned, unbuckling his safety belt and scrambling up off the bench. “Last one on the *Gwyndemere* is a hinkypunk’s uncle!”

“It isn’t a race,” Ginny chided, standing and extending a hand to Lily.

“Speak for yourself,” Harry replied, stepping forward to meet his sons. “*I’m* not going to spend this voyage as a hinkypunk’s uncle.”

Both Albus and James grabbed one of their dad’s hands. A moment later, the bubble ship vanished around them and was replaced by the deck of the *Gwyndemere*, which glowed in the morning sunlight. Cool wind coursed over the ship, singing in James’ ears, and he immediately broke away from his father, laughing and running toward the bow.

“My feet were first to touch the deck,” Albus called from behind. “I jumped right before we Disapparated so I’d land here first. You lose!”

James ignored his brother as he neared the pointed prow of the ship, slowing to a stop, his eyes widening.

“Mum just got here with Lil,” Albus announced, catching up. “She says we’re supposed to take our bags down to the cabins and what in Merlin’s magic mousehole is *that*?”

“Haven’t the faintest,” James replied, approaching the strange shape. “It wasn’t here before, was it?”

Ralph, Izzy, and Lucy joined the boys as they moved around the object. It had apparently been installed on the deck since last night’s arrival and it was, essentially, a very ornate brass chair, elevated atop a series of five wrought iron steps. The chair was fitted onto a swiveling base and had a complicated brass armature attached to its front. James studied it but couldn’t begin to imagine what the armature was for.

“You’re the smart one, Lucy,” he said, scratching his head. “What do you think this thing is for?”

“*Rose* is the smart one,” Lucy admonished, mildly annoyed. “I just read a lot.”

Ralph frowned crookedly. “What’s the difference, exactly?”

Izzy widened her eyes solemnly. “Petra says smart is in the brain of the perceiver.”

“Whatever that means,” Ralph muttered.

“Yeah,” Albus insisted, reaching to touch the ornately crafted stairs, “but you’re good at seeing how stuff fits together, Lu. It’s a knack.”

“Looks to me,” Lucy sighed, walking around to the front of the strange fixture, “like something is missing. See that brass flange there on the end of the pivoting arm thing? Something is meant to fit into it.”

“See?” Albus crowed, running around to the front to join Lucy. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about!”

James heard the low voices of adults nearby. He turned and saw Merlin, Denniston Dolohov, and the *Gwyndemere*’s captain, Ash Farragut, approaching slowly.

“We haven’t any time to spare, unfortunately, captain,” Merlin was saying. “I am quite happy to leave matters in the hands of your very capable crew.”

Farragut nodded cynically. “All *too* capable, if you take my meaning.”

“Piracy isn’t what it used to be,” Merlin said, smiling. “In my day, one couldn’t ply the waves without expecting to be boarded by any number of competing piratical hoards. They were like swarms of bees on the high seas. Considering the preventative measures enacted by the Magical Maritime Regulatory Commission, I suspect we will manage just fine, whatever befalls us.”

“Their ships have been spotted on the horizon this very morning,” Farragut clarified, tilting his head in the sunlight.

“Then they will expect us to remain at port,” Harry Potter nodded, approaching with a grim smile on his face. “Surprise is almost always an advantage. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Dolohov?”

“Oh, I happily submit to your expertise in such matters,” Denniston replied dismissively. “But I agree that we do indeed have a schedule to keep. Let us be off.”

Farragut nodded approvingly. “Then let it be so. Gentlemen.” He strode away, angling toward the deckhouse.

James drifted toward Petra and Audrey, who stood near the mid-ship stairs. The pair seemed to be studying a small knot of people who had suddenly appeared on the ship. “Who are they?” James asked, nodding toward a group.

“Fellow sojourners,” Audrey replied, keeping her voice even. “Americans, I should think.”

James peered at the newcomers. There was a group of them moving up the stairs, pushing past the others, meandering toward the bow and chattering like a flock of birds. Most of them were dressed in black, only slightly older than James, but the central figure seemed to be a woman with jet hair, a pale, angular face, and an expression of indulgent boredom. She wore a long black dress with a tightly laced bodice, a lot of silver jewelry, and heavy purple eye make-up, so that she looked, to James, rather like she had recently escaped from her own funeral.

“Pardon yourselves, students,” she sang morosely to her entourage as they streamed past James, Petra, and Audrey. “We are representing another culture. We do not wish to appear rude.”

The students babbled on, not sparing the others a glance, and James had the distinct impression that the woman had spoken more for his, Petra, and Audrey’s benefits than that of her own charges.

Audrey spoke up, easily raising her voice over the chattering teenagers. “I take it by your accent and words that you are from the States, Miss?” she said, smiling pleasantly. “We are on our

way there ourselves for a rather lengthy stay. Don't raise our expectations overmuch, lest we be disappointed that the rest of the country is not as pleasant as you and your delightful associates."

The woman slowed and faced Audrey, her expression unchanging. "Persephone Remora," she announced languidly, stretching out a limp hand toward Audrey, who shook it perfunctorily. "And please pardon me for saying so, but I was not referring to the United States. That country is only our current residence, not our home. We can hardly be expected to represent it any more than you might be expected to represent this ship. No offense meant. The fact is: I and my friends are returning from a summer's exploration of our ancestral homeland. Perhaps you have heard of it," she paused and narrowed her eyes slightly. "It is called *Transylvania*."

"Indeed I have," Audrey smiled. "Why just this spring my husband and I had quince soup with the Archduke of Brasov and his wife. Have you met them? Lovely couple. She makes her own tzuika, which is quite good."

Remora seemed faintly disdainful. "You'll excuse me for saying so, but we don't recognize the *current* Transylvanian ruling class. Our heritage is beholden to a much older historical aristocracy. I'm sure you haven't heard of it. It's rather a... *secret* society." She sniffed and looked meaningfully out over the waves.

"Ah," Audrey answered nonchalantly. "Well, I'm sure your secrets are best left uncovered. Far be it for us to pry."

Remora continued to stare out at the waves dramatically. After a moment, she seemed to realize that the pose wasn't having the effect that she had apparently hoped for. She coughed lightly and turned back. "I'm terribly sorry," she said faintly. "The sunlight does take its toll on... such as ourselves."

"I have some Amberwycke's sunblock here in my bag," Petra replied, glancing at Audrey. "I'd be happy to share it around. It's coconut-scented."

"No," Remora oozed, her shoulders slumping slightly. "Thank you ever so much. I should catch up with my friends. If you'll excuse me." She turned, began to walk away, and then looked back over her shoulder, making her eyes twinkle meaningfully. "It's been... *deliciously* delightful to meet you," she said in a low, breathy voice.

"Likewise," Audrey said, smiling cheerfully. "We'll see you this afternoon for tea, won't we?"

"Are you sure you don't want some sunblock?" Petra said, proffering the bottle. "You're looking a little peaked around the eyes."

Remora huffed and turned away, stalking toward the small throng that milled in front of the deckhouse.

"What was that all about?" James asked, frowning after the departing woman.

Audrey sighed. "Vampires," she said lightly. "So haughty and melodramatic. Ah well, whatever makes them happy."

James blinked, looking back at the black-clothed knot of people. Remora had rejoined them, and they moved around her like a school of pale, sneering fish. James frowned. "I didn't think there *were* any vampires in America.'

Petra shook her head, smiling crookedly. In a low stage whisper, she answered, "There aren't."

"Let's not be too hasty," Audrey said, clucking her tongue. "The United States is, after all the great melting pot. I do suspect, however, that if there *are* vampires residing in America... they are not *them*."

A man passed by in front of them, and James glanced up. He recognized the man as the ship's first mate, a burly, cheerful bloke named Barstow. He was wearing a floppy gray hat and whistling happily to himself, heading toward the bow. Over his shoulder was slung a very long, thin pole, fitted with reinforcing brass sleeves. James narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, and then ran to follow.

"Hey Barstow," Albus called, grinning, as the man approached. "When do we shove off, eh?"

Barstow answered jovially, "Depends on how well the fish are biting this morning, don't it?"

"If you say so," Albus shrugged.

Izzy plopped onto the sunny deck and crossed her legs. "What do fish have to do with anything?"

"Oh, everything, love," Barstow said gravely, adjusting his hat. "You just watch and see. You might say they're the key to the whole affair."

"I don't like fish all that much," Ralph admitted. "I think I had enough back down in the Aquapolis. I was hoping for something a little more... terrestrial."

Barstow smiled and climbed the wrought iron stairs to the brass chair. It turned slightly as he sat down on it. "This fishy ain't for eating, my friend. You just wait and see."

Everyone watched as Barstow settled himself into the seat, resting his feet on a pair of fitted pedals and turning the chair so that it faced backwards, overlooking the rest of the ship. Apparently satisfied, he lifted the strange pole straight up into the air. It wavered high over the deck, flashing darts of sunlight from its brass fittings. Carefully, Barstow began to swing the pole in a small arc, as if he were using it to draw a circle in the briny sky. The circle widened as Barstow swung faster, creating larger and larger arcs.

"Look," Izzy cried, pointing. "It's a fishing pole! Just like Papa Warren used to use on the lake!"

James squinted in the sunlight, trying to follow the movement of the pole's tip. Sure enough, a length of magical string spooled out behind it, pulling a very large ephemeral hook. Suddenly, Barstow heaved the pole back over his shoulder, stretching back so much that the hook swooped far behind him, past the prow of the Gwyndemere and out over the waves. Finally, in one swift, smooth motion, Barstow cast the pole forward, snapping the large ghostly hook through the air. It flashed

past the masts, over the deckhouse and smokestack, and out over the stern, where it finally dipped into the waves. Barstow reached forward and fitted the handle of the fishing pole into the clasp that Lucy had mentioned earlier. It locked into place, making the pole an extension of the articulated brass arm. That done, Barstow relaxed, but only a little.

“What,” Ralph asked, his eyes wide, “do you catch with a hook like that?”

“There’s no bait on it!” Albus suddenly said, looking accusingly up at Barstow. “How do you plan to catch anything with no bait?”

“Oh, it’s baited, friends,” Barstow laughed, “but not with food. The hook’s made of a little magical concoction I’ve been working on over the last decade or so. It’s not an easy thing, conjuring sea serpent pheromone, believe you me.”

Ralph paled a little and peered out at the choppy waves. “Sea serpent?” he repeated carefully.

“Pheromone?” James added, standing on tiptoes to see over the stern of the boat. “What’s that?”

Lucy seemed to be stifling a grin. “It’s sort of like a love potion. For fish.”

“For a sea serpent,” Ralph clarified. “I’m just trying to be sure I heard him right. That’s what he said, isn’t it?”

A loud twang suddenly pierced the air. Barstow heaved backwards on the pole and its articulated arm, and James saw the magical thread trembling tautly over the boat.

“There she is!” Barstow cried happily. “Landed a big one! That’s Henrietta, I’ll wager! She’s the best of the fleet! Hold fast, everyone!”

James, Albus, Izzy, and Lucy scrambled to the ship’s railing, craning down the length of the boat for a glimpse of the mysterious Henrietta. In the brass chair, Barstow grunted and cursed to himself, wrestling with the pole, which bent precipitously. “Come on over, sweetheart,” he muttered through gritted teeth. “Right this way, that’s it. You know the routine…”

James finally saw the point where the magical fishing line entered the water. A shape heaved beneath, pushing the waves into a sudden, boiling hill. A line of serrated fins broke the surface and sawed through it, angling toward the *Gwyndemere*.

“That can’t be good,” Ralph said in a high voice.

James swallowed, but Barstow seemed grimly pleased.

“That’s my great big girl,” he teased. “Come to papa, then. Just a little further, that’s the way…”

A monstrous, serpentine shape became visible as it shot beneath the boat, dragging the magical fishing line with it. Barstow whooped happily and swung around as the chair swiveled beneath him, pulled by the massive shape beneath the waves.

“She’s through the harness,” he cried, bracing himself against the chair’s foot pedals. “Hang on tight, everyone!”

“I really wish people would stop saying that,” Ralph moaned, gripping the railing with both hands.

As if on cue, a horrible shudder shook the boat, jerking it forward in the water. James stumbled but remained upright, clinging staunchly to one of the ship’s bollards. Lucy fell backwards against him and James caught her. Her black hair streamed into his face, tickling his cheeks.

“Sorry James,” she called, glancing back at him over her shoulder and grinning sheepishly. “I thought I was ready for it.”

James laughed. “I don’t think anybody was ready for that.”

“We’re off!” Albus cried, running toward the prow and peering forward. “Excellent! She’s pulling us! And look how fast we’re going!”

“She can maintain forty knots,” Barstow called down proudly, operating the screws that locked the brass armature in place. “With bursts of ninety if required. She’s the fastest of all her sisters, if you ask me.”

“Is she really a sea serpent?” Izzy asked, raising her hand to her forehead and studying the waves that roared under the ship’s prow. “I can’t see anything but a sort of froth up there by her head. That’s her head, right?”

“It’s her cranial fin,” Barstow nodded. “And that there’s Henrietta, the great Atlantean razorback. Biggest and longest of the sea beasts. Good thing she’s on our side, eh? Back in the old days, creatures like her were real ship-eaters. Now, there’s only a few left in the whole world. Worth more than her own weight in Galleons, she is.”

“How do you steer her?” Albus asked, glancing back at the pole. “And how’s that little bit of wood hold her?”

Barstow laughed. “That’s just the lead,” he explained, calling over the rushing wind. “We use it like reins on a horse, turning her this way and that. The real muscle is underneath the boat. She’s attached to us by an iron harness and a length of anchor chain. That’s what I was teasing her through, and *that’s* the only tricky part. From here on out, it’s smooth sailing.”

In a concerned voice, Izzy asked, “Doesn’t Henrietta ever get tired?”

“She ain’t like us, love,” Barstow replied, squinting toward the horizon. “She could take us the whole way and back with barely a breath. But we’ll stop and feed her once or twice along the way, give her the breathers she deserves. After all, she’s the queen of the voyage, isn’t she?” He smiled lovingly at the great beast as it carved the waves.

“What about the big gorilla?” Ralph asked. “Doesn’t he get bored?”

“See for yourself!” Barstow called down, hooking a thumb over his shoulder.

James, Lucy, and Ralph turned to look back. The bow’s huge cargo doors were thrown open in the sunlight. Peering up out of them, resting his chin on his crossed arms, was the great ape. His black fur rippled in the wind and he blinked slowly, apparently enjoying the sense of speed and the rushing air.

“He’ll be like that the whole rest of the trip,” Barstow commented without looking back. “Nothing we can do about it. The great brute’s happy to let somebody else do the work from here on out. He’s like a dog in a carriage window, isn’t he?”



The *Gwyndemere* was only half an hour into her long journey when a whistle pierced the air high overhead. James, who was still on the prow with Ralph and Lucy, glanced up. The mate in the crow’s nest had his spyglass to his eye again, extended to such an extent that it almost seemed to defy gravity. “Ship spotted at two o’ the clock!” he bellowed, pointing.

“Ah, this doesn’t bode well,” Barstow announced.

Lucy squinted up at Barstow. To James and Ralph, she said, “I can’t help but notice that he’s smiling when he says that.”

“It’s just that weird seafaring sense of humor,” Ralph replied. “Like jolly songs about all your dead mates and zombie pirates and the like. They seem to have a sort of skewed perspective on life, don’t they?”

High above, his voice thin in the whipping winds, the mate in the crow’s nest called again. “Ship is a triple-mast clipper, bearing the sigil of the *Three-Eyed Isis*.”

Barstow whistled appreciatively between his teeth. “The *Three-Eyed Isis*. That’s bad, that is. Best to get below-decks, my young friends. This could get fierce.”

“What’s a *Three-Eyed Isis*?” James asked, leaning on the railing and shielding his eyes from the sun. Sure enough, a dark shape bobbed on the horizon, apparently tracking the *Gwyndemere*.

“That’s the ship of the pirate Hannibal Farson, Terror of the Seven Seas. Looks like we’re in for a wee tussle.”

“Hannibal Farson isn’t the Terror of the Seven Seas,” the crow’s nest mate called down, still scanning the horizon with his spyglass. “You’re thinking of Captain Dirk Dread. That’s Farson the Fearsome, Fright of the Atlantic.”

Barstow nodded. “Ah, right you are, Brinks! No argument there. Hard to keep ’em all straight, isn’t it?”

“If yeh’re talking real terrors,” a third voice called out, carrying on the wind, “then it’s Rebekah Redboots yeh’re thinkin’ of. As beastly as she is lovely. Just as quick to kill yeh as to look at yeh, but you’d die happy, havin’ gazed upon ‘er deadly beauty.”

Barstow and Brinks murmured their wistful agreement.

“Is that a ship over there?” Petra asked, approaching James and peering at the horizon.

“Pirates, apparently,” James nodded. “Only it sounds like it’s going to be a bit of a reunion, really.”

Lucy looked from the distant ship to Barstow where he sat on his high brass chair. She called up, “What are they after anyway?”

“Oh, lots of stuff, love,” Barstow answered enthusiastically. “Passenger jewels and money, the captain’s safe, valuable cargo that they can resell on the wizarding black market...”

“And don’t forget the women,” Brinks added loudly. “They’ll be after the women, for sure.”

“But don’t you worry, my pretties,” Barstow said soothingly. “They’ll treat you with the greatest of respect and decorum. It’s the pirate way, you know, all dashing and debonair. Oftentimes, the women caught by pirates don’t even want to be rescued, when it comes right down to it. Why, I knew of whole ships full of available ladies what set sail just in the hopes of being caught up by a band of the watery rogues.” He sighed deeply.

“Unless it be Rebekah Redboots,” the third mate’s voice speculated. “Then they’d be after the men-folk, likely.”

“Aye...,” Brinks and Barstow agreed soberly. After a long thoughtful moment, Barstow went on. “Most likely, though, they’re after Henrietta. Like I said, she’s worth her weight in Galleons. Sea serpents are terrible hard to come by anymore, and every pirate captain out there is dead jealous to get one. Makes ’em unbeatable, even by the coppers from the Magical Maritimers’.”

At that moment, Albus ran up, his hair whipping wildly in the wind. “Hey everybody, Uncle Percy says we need to all get below-decks, captain’s orders! There might be a ‘skirmish’, he says!”

“Cool,” James grinned, matching his brother’s obvious excitement. “Are you really going to go down and miss all the fun?”

“Normally no,” Albus admitted, “but Mum knows how we are. She’s asked Captain Farragut if we can watch everything from the big windows in his quarters. Best view on the whole ship, he says, *and* there’ll be biscuits and tea!”

“Your mum really knows how to handle a bribe,” Petra said appreciatively. “Better hurry on down. And get Izzy, if you would. She’s in our cabin, drawing pictures.”

James glanced at Petra, and then turned to the others. “Go on,” he said. “I’ll catch up in a minute.”

“Mum will leather you with a hex if you stay up here,” Albus said, tilting his head knowledgeably. “But feel free. More biscuits for me. Come on, Lu. Where’s Ralph?”

“He headed below-decks the moment you mentioned a skirmish,” Lucy answered, nodding toward the stairs. She turned back to James. “You want me to wait with you?”

“No, go ahead, Lu. I just want to watch a minute. I’ll be right there.”

Lucy gazed at him for a long moment, her expression unreadable. “All right. See you in the captain’s quarters. You too, Petra?”

“Sure,” the older girl answered. “And thanks for gathering Izzy. Tell her to bring her crayons and parchments if she wants. Once she gets drawing, it can be hard to get her to stop.”

Lucy nodded and turned to follow Albus.

“She’s closing in on us,” Brinks called, watching the horizon with his spyglass. “Matching our speed and angling to meet us dead on.”

“That I can see, mate,” Barstow answered amiably, gripping the pole before him. “But she won’t match us for long! Let’s open things up a bit.”

James felt the subtle lift of the boat beneath him as Henrietta picked up speed. Waves clapped beneath the prow and exploded into sparkling mist, which flashed past the boat with dizzying speed. The *Three-Eyed Isis* began to fall past, but only very slowly. The pirate’s ship was near enough now that James could see men moving around on the decks. The image on the mainsail was visible: a fanged skull with three gaping eyes. As James watched, the eyes narrowed and the skull chomped, as if it meant to swallow the *Gwyndemere* up.

“Did you read the dream story yet?” Petra asked, not taking her eyes from the rushing pirate ship.

“No, not yet,” James admitted. “I haven’t had much of a chance. Tonight, I think.”

She nodded slowly. “I appreciate it. Talk to me after you do. All right?”

James glanced aside at her. “Sure. Why wouldn’t I?”

She shrugged. “You might not want to.”

James shook his head. “I’ll want to. I promise.”

“She’s angling for a broadside strike,” Brinks called down. “She’s not as fast as us, so she’s aiming to cut us off before we outrun ’er.”

“Hard a-port,” Barstow answered, turning the directional pole aside. Henrietta responded immediately, turning to the left, pulling the *Gwyndemere* away from the advancing pirate ship.

A low whistle and a burst of black sparks exploded over the left side of the ship, making Barstow jump and turn hard right again. James wouldn't have thought black sparks were even possible until he saw them swirling over the deck and fading into the rushing wind.

"Another ship!" Brinks cried from the crow's nest. "Ten o' the clock, approaching fast! Looks like the *Scarlet Mist*!"

"The *Scarlet Mist*?" Barstow repeated incredulously. "That means the two are working together, and that can only mean one thing!"

James ran to the other side of the prow and peered into the distance, immediately spying the second ship. Its red sails and black hull roared through the water, cutting the waves like a sword. "What's it mean?" he yelled over the wind.

"It means they're engaging in the old Vice and Quarry maneuver," Barstow answered. "Very risky, that is." Raising his voice, he called up to Brinks. "Keep an eye afore us, mate! Where there's two, there's three!"

"Already a-spied it," Brinks hollered, leaning forward in the crow's nest, his spyglass clapped to his eye. "It's the *Poseidon's Peril*, I'd wager."

Barstow whistled between his teeth again and shook his head. "Not good, my friends. Not good at all. I wonder what could possibly get all three of those salty dogs to work together? Surely not a single sea serpent. They'd just kill each other fightin' over her."

Another burst of black sparks rocked the *Gwyndemere* from the left. James felt the shudder of the blast beneath his feet. He was becoming rather alarmed. Petra, on the other hand, seemed strangely calm. James crossed the deck again and stood next to her. Even now, he was pleased that, despite their age difference, he was as tall as she was. Her long hair flew in the wind. A series of orange flashes appeared along the flank of the *Three-Eyed Isis*. A split second later, the *Gwyndemere* shook under a barrage of magical blasts.

"They're trying to slow us down," Barstow cried. "Time to show them what this girl can do!"

He jerked the steering pole and hunkered in his seat. Henrietta lunged forward, and James saw the serpentine humps of her back appear in the water ahead of the ship, rising out of the waves as she plowed ahead. The ship almost seemed to be skipping over the waves now. Wind coursed over the deck, singing in the rigging and thumping against the furled bulks of the sails. James leaned into the wind and peered straight ahead. The *Poseidon's Peril* was a long low boat, sitting broadside ahead of them, forming a barricade. The *Three-Eyed Isis* and the *Scarlet Mist* were angling closer, forcing the *Gwyndemere* into an inevitable collision course.

"Why aren't we slowing?" James asked breathlessly. "We're going to ram them!" He glanced back at Petra, who seemed to be watching with mild interest. James furrowed his brow at her worriedly, but she didn't appear to notice.

"My girl still has a few surprises up her sleeve!" Barstow called out, wrestling the steering pole, driving Henrietta still faster. Raising his voice to a deep bellow, he cried, "Man the sails, mates! Be ready on my mark!"

Both James and Petra stumbled and grabbed the railing as another, larger magical blast exploded directly beneath them. A metallic twang pierced the air and the *Gwyndemere* suddenly bore down into the waves, losing momentum.

Barstow cursed colorfully and loudly, obviously alarmed. James looked up at him, wide-eyed. The steering pole jutted straight out over the bow, trembling wildly, pointing directly at Henrietta as she plowed the waves. The magical fishline glowed and throbbed, vibrating in the air like a guitar string. A deep wooden groan emanated from the deck near the brass chair's base, and James was frightened to see that it was being slowly pried up, its huge bolts bending under some enormous pressure.

"Dodongo!" Barstow cried, struggling with the steering pole. "Use that great hairy reach of yours and grab on! Hold tight!"

Behind him, the giant ape stirred. He leaned forward in the hold, raising his head over the level of the deck, and stretched his huge right arm up out of the cargo hold's wide opening. Delicately, Dodongo gripped the rear of Barstow's chair with his huge gray fingers, holding it in place.

"What's your name, boy?" Barstow called down through gritted teeth.

"James!"

"Climb up here, James, and make it quick, if you please!"

James ran around the brass chair and scrambled up the stairs, ducking under Dodongo's huge leathery palm. Barstow moved aside, nodding for James to assume the brass seat.

"They've gone and shot out Henrietta's harness chain," he announced seriously. "Broke it clean in two! She's pulling us by the lead alone, which means we barely have any control and we're dragging low in the water. We can't escape unless I get down there and *Reparo* the harness chain straight away. I need you to take the reins and hold on as tightly as you can. It's *absolutely essential* that you not let go, no matter what, understand?"

James gulped, remembering a somewhat similar experience at the beginning of the summer. Only then, it had been Merlin and the brake lever of the Hogwarts Express. He leaned forward and gripped the trembling pole with both hands. "Got it!" he said, his heart pounding.

"That's a lad," Barstow nodded, speaking very quickly. "Just keep her aimed straight at the *Poseidon*, and don't slow down no matter what. Now pay attention: the steering pole is more than just a pole. It's a wand too. I need you to watch this gauge here. When the needle reads eighty-eight knots, I need you to snap the wand upright and call this incantation: *Pesceopteryx!* Simple as that, right? That's a lad!"

Barstow leapt down the wrought iron stairway to the deck.

"Wait!" James cried, his voice cracking. "Say it again! How'm I going to remember that?"

"I'll help you," Petra called up, cupping her hands to her mouth. "Just watch the gauge!"

James looked down at the small brass instrument, his eyes bulging. The tiny silver needle trembled between the numbers fifty and sixty.

More magical blasts peppered the ship from both directions. The pirate ships on either side were coordinating their attacks, driving the *Gwyndemere* straight toward the *Poseidon's Peril*. Black sparks swirled, darkening the air. James glanced ahead. From his position on the brass chair, he could see the blockading ship very clearly. It looked alarmingly close, growing nearer even as he watched. Pirates lined the deck, shouting and waving wands and cutlasses. Henrietta churned the water, her serpentine humps plainly visible, her serrated back sawing the waves in half.

Barstow was leaning over the bow railing, so far and so precariously that James felt sure the man must tumble over into the ocean and be driven under the weight of the advancing ship. His voice carried on the wind as he shot *Reparo* charms into the water, aiming for Henrietta's broken harness chain.

"How fast now?" Petra called up to James.

"Sixty-five!" he answered. "No faster! The lead is just pulling the bow too far down into the water, dragging us! We're never going to make it!"

"*Reparo!*" Barstow hollered, kicking his heels in the air as he leaned over the railing. "*Reparo*, you great useless hunk of rusty iron! Damn and drat!"

James gripped the pole so hard that his knuckles were white in the sunlight. He craned backwards and saw crewmen clinging from odd angles on the masts, watching breathlessly, their eyes wide and waiting. The *Scarlet Mist* and the *Three-Eyed Isis* tracked the *Gwyndemere* on both sides, frighteningly close, hemming them in. James could hear the shouts and whoops of the pirates from their rocking decks.

"*REPARO!*" Barstow shouted, his voice straining.

"It's no use!" James called out, watching as the *Poseidon's Peril* filled his vision. The pirates on the deck had begun to scatter as the *Gwyndemere* bore down on them. Henrietta dove under the waves, preparing to swim under the other ship's long hull.

Below, Petra drew a deep breath. To James, she seemed eerily calm. She closed her eyes.

Deep beneath the deck, a dull clatter and a metallic clang sounded. The *Gwyndemere* lurched violently and rose onto the waves, buoyed up suddenly and virtually leaping out of the water. The steering pole loosened in James' grip, no longer bearing the full weight of Henrietta as she pulled the ship.

"Aha!" Barstow cried in disbelief. "The chain's repaired! Go! Go!"

James boggled, still looking up at the *Poseidon's Peril*. The *Gwyndemere* was rushing toward it, doomed to ram it in mere seconds.

"James!" Petra called. "How fast?"

James tore his eyes from the looming ship. "Eighty-five... just a little more...!"

“On my mark, mates!” Barstow bellowed, raising both hands.

“Eighty-eight!” James cried.

“*Pesceopteryx!*” Petra shouted, cupping her hands to her mouth again.

James repeated the incantation as loudly and accurately as he could, jerking the steering pole upright. Simultaneously, Barstow hollered an order to his mates in the ship’s rigging. The response was immediate and shocking. Henrietta lunged forward, so quickly and powerfully that her entire body angled up out of the water, trailed by a sparkling wreath of seawater. Two leathery shapes unfurled from her back and snapped open like parachutes, spraying fine mist. Henrietta, it seemed, had wings. She pumped them in one enormous, muscular stroke and shot up into the air, her long body streaming lithely over the deck of the *Poseidon’s Peril*, covering it with her shadow. Pirates scattered, and some even leapt from the deck, dropping their cutlasses as they plummeted into the heaving ocean below.

On the *Gwyndemere*, every sail unfurled at once, suddenly and powerfully, creating a deep reverberating thump of captured wind. The complicated riggings unfolded and flexed, acting almost like wings, and the great ship heaved out of the ocean, following in Henrietta’s path. James held his breath, but the rest of the crew hollered and whooped, their voices rising in the sudden, rushing silence.

The *Gwyndemere* soared over the *Poseidon’s Peril*, so low that her wet hull crushed the other ship’s deckhouse, smashing it to matchsticks. She plowed over the *Poseidon’s* main mast, breaking it like a twig and forcing the unfortunate pirate ship to roll over in the water.

James clung to the steering pole, his hair streaming behind him and his eyes wide with a mixture of wonder and terror. Henrietta moved through the air ahead of the ship like a massive, scaly banner, her body flexing and sparkling greenly, her great membranous wings swooping easily, drawing streamers of water across the sky. Finally, gently, she angled downwards, furled her great wings, and dove to meet her long shadow on the waves. She made very little splash as she plunged into the depths. Behind her, however, the *Gwyndemere* landed like a whale, pounding the surface and sending up an explosion of dense white water, drenching James. A moment later, the crashing waters fell away and the ship cruised on sedately, her sails flapping in the ocean breeze.

“A job well done, James!” Barstow bellowed happily. “I told you we’d be in for a wee tussle, didn’t I? Why, I’m tempted to recruit you to a life on the high seas, I am! Not everyone can air-pilot an Atlantean razorback their first time out! I was sure we were going to end up riding the *Poseidon* home piggyback!”

James flushed, his heart still thundering with adrenaline. “Well, I don’t think they got away quite as undamaged as we seem to have,” he called sheepishly.

Barstow angled toward the wrought iron stairs, patting Dodongo cheerfully on his enormous head. “Ah, they’ll be fine,” he replied, climbing up and trading seats with James. “It isn’t the first time the *Poseidon’s* been turned turtle in the water. They’ll have themselves a grand adventure of it, bashing their way through the hull into the sunlight, then repairing everything and turning her back over. Gives ’em something constructive to do for the rest of the day.”

James felt himself grinning helplessly as he climbed down. Feeling slightly drunk on adrenaline, he angled over toward Dodongo and plopped down onto the edge of the cargo hold doors, resting his arm on the great ape's nose. He replayed the last few minutes in his head, not quite believing everything that had happened. Curiously, the thing that amazed him most was how Barstow had managed to repair the harness chain at the last possible moment. It had looked perfectly hopeless and James understood why: it would have been virtually impossible to see the broken harness chain under the waves, where it was being dragged by Henrietta. Furthermore, doing magic through water, as Merlin had implied earlier, was extremely tricky. So how had Barstow managed it?

James' eyes widened as he remembered something. Moments before the chain had magically reattached to the ship, Petra had been standing on the prow, her eyes closed, as if in deep concentration. The last time James had seen anything like that had been...

"On the train," he muttered to himself. "On the Hogwarts Express with Merlin, when he'd made the tree grow beneath it, holding it up. But how could Petra...?"

He frowned to himself. Next to him, Dodongo stirred, pursing his lips and nodding James' arm off his nose.

James got up and looked around the deck, curious to ask Petra about what he had seen, but she was nowhere in sight. James found that he wasn't particularly surprised.

Here endeth chapter three! What did you think?

Tomorrow's chapter will be released at noon, CST, via www.jamespotterseries.com. In the meantime, come on over to the [Grotto Keep forum](#) to discuss and **take part in today's poll question: *Why were the pirates after the Gwyndemere?*** To capture some secret cargo? To stop Harry from getting to the States? To kidnap someone on board? To steal Henrietta? Or something else?

And 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 chapter release: "The Dream Story"! Check out www.girlonthedock.com for details.