



5. NEW AMSTERDAM

“So what happened out there anyway?” Albus asked quietly.

James lay in his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. The ship still creaked ominously as it rocked, but the brunt of the storm had finally passed. The thump of footsteps could be heard from the decks above as the crew attempted to repair what was left of the stern mast.

“James?” It was Ralph this time, from the bunk across the narrow room. “You asleep over there?”

“No.”

“So what gives? What really happened?”

James sighed. “Apparently you lot saw it all from the stern windows in the captain’s quarters. You tell me.”

“Hah,” Albus laughed derisively. “We hardly got to see anything before Merlin got involved. We heard the mast fall over and saw bits of it go over the side, and then we saw Petra’s feet hanging down, swinging back and forth with the ropes all tangled up in them. Mum let out a scream, and that’s when Merlin came up and put the lights out.”

“I don’t get it,” James said, rolling over and looking at Ralph in the opposite bunk. “Why did he pull the curtains?”

Ralph screwed up his face thoughtfully. “That’s not what he did. He came forward and stood in front of the window, spreading out his arms, and he said something in that weird language of his. Old Celtic, I guess. Rose would probably know what it meant. Next thing we know, the windows had all gone completely dark, like they’d been covered in black paint. I guess he didn’t want us to see it if Petra was going to fall. I mean, Izzy was there, after all. Petra’s her sister.”

“Thanks for the explanation,” James said, sighing.

“So tell us!” Albus insisted. “What happened?”

James shook his head on his pillow. “She fell. That’s all. Lightning struck the mast at the back of the ship, right next to us. It fell over and knocked Petra over the side. She hung onto the railing until I got over there and grabbed her.”

Albus shifted on his bunk, squeaking the thin mattress. “What was she doing up on deck in the first place? Didn’t she know there was a bloody hurricane going?”

“I don’t know,” James said. He meant to go on, to try to explain, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead, he let the silence spin out, telling its own story.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Albus commented, “she’s been a little odd ever since she showed up at our place, earlier this summer. Whatever happened back at her grandparents’ farm, I think it knocked a few owls loose in her owlery, if you know what I mean.”

“Shut up, Al,” James said. He felt his face heating, but he tried not to let it show in his voice. “You don’t know anything about it. So just shut up.”

Ralph rolled over and rested his chin on his forearm, peering across the darkened room. “Well, that’s kind of the point, isn’t it? Hardly anybody knows what happened there. I mean, there’s Damien, Sabrina, and Ted, but they sure aren’t talking. Merlin’s orders. Whatever happened, it had to have been pretty ugly. Both of Petra’s grandparents ended up dead.”

“Phyllis wasn’t Petra’s grandmother,” James announced darkly. “She was just the woman Petra’s grandfather married, and she was perfectly horrid. Whatever happened to her, she got what she deserved.”

The bed beneath James squeaked again as Albus moved around on it. A moment later, his head appeared next to James’ bunk, peering up at him. “You know something, don’t you? Tell!”

“I don’t know anything. Shut up and go to sleep, you berk.”

Albus stared at him critically.

Across the room, Ralph said, “I don’t know what this Phyllis woman was supposed to have done, but she was Izzy’s mum, at least. I mean, maybe there was a good reason, maybe there wasn’t, but it’s a pretty strong thing to say that death was what she deserved.”

“Well, Petra isn’t in Azkaban, is she?” James replied angrily. “Obviously whatever happened, nobody’s blaming her for it.”

“Or nobody can prove that she did it,” Albus added, still studying James’ face.

James threw off the covers and shoved Albus aside. He leapt nimbly to the floor and pulled the door open, letting in the light from the corridor.

“Hey,” Ralph called, “where are you going?”

“Out,” James replied, not turning back. “That’s all. Don’t follow me.”

He pulled the door closed and stalked along the narrow corridor, fuming and confused. When he reached the stairs to the main deck, he turned toward them and climbed to the door, which was propped open, letting in the night air.

The deck was wet beneath James’ bare feet. He peered back toward the stern and saw deckhands moving about by lantern-light, using their wands to repair what remained of the stern mast. Sighing, James turned toward the bow stairs and climbed up, glad that this end of the ship, at least, seemed dark and relatively deserted.

The mate seated in the brass steering chair sang jauntily to himself, clutching a pipe between his teeth. Between stanzas, the mate puffed, and the orange glow of the pipe’s flame was the only light to be seen. James kept behind the mate and moved toward the railing, which he leaned on. The ocean was nearly invisible in the darkness, but for the phantom-like shapes of the whitecaps. Waves thumped against the hull as Henrietta plowed relentlessly onward.

James’ thoughts were a blur. The events of the night played over and over in his head, stranger and more mysterious with each remembrance. Petra’s words had been frightening enough, but they had paled in comparison to the nightmare of the falling mast and the horrors that had followed. He recalled the sad certainty of her voice as she’d told him to let her go, to let her fall into the ocean, following after the enigmatic lost brooch, as if that was something he could ever, in a million years, allow to happen. The worst part of all, however, had been that moment—that one, crystalline instant of perfect understanding—when he knew that Petra, the girl he loved, was going to die.

And then, to no one’s greater shock than his own, he, James, had conjured the mysterious silver thread, the one that had connected him to her, saving her from the reaching waves. Yesterday evening, Barstow had said that the storm that was coming was not like the one in *The Triumvirate*. *This won’t be any magical storm*, he had said, *like what nearly overtook the fabled Treus and his crew*. Now, however, James couldn’t help wondering.

Footsteps sounded on the wet deck, nearby. James didn’t look up. He hoped that whoever it was would simply pass him by. Instead, he heard the figure approach him, felt the warmth of the person as they leaned against the railing next to him, nearly invisible in the stormy darkness.

“Are you doing all right?” a voice asked quietly. It was his dad.

James sighed deeply. “Yeah. I guess.”

Together, they watched the marching shapes of the whitecaps, moving like ghosts alongside the ship. After a minute, his dad spoke again. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

James thought about it. Finally, he said, "Petra's sick, Dad. But not sick like Mum thinks. She's not well. In her thoughts. I think she... I think she came up on the deck tonight... because she wanted something to happen to her."

Harry Potter nodded slowly. His glasses glinted softly as the moon finally peeked through the tattering clouds. "I've spoken to Merlinus about it," he said. "The Headmaster has been... watching her."

"What's the matter with her?" James asked, looking aside at his father. "Does Merlin know? Is she going to be all right?"

Harry turned his head toward James and smiled slightly. "I'll tell you the truth, son. I don't know. But she's been through an awful lot. It will take time for her to work through it all. Be patient. Be her friend."

James sighed again, turning away. "I don't even know how to do that much. Every time I talk to her, I get... I don't know..." He shrugged and shook his head.

Harry's smile widened a little and he bumped James with his shoulder. "I know how you feel, son. Don't worry. The words will come when they need to. Just like they did tonight."

"What do you mean?" James asked, glancing back at his father.

Harry shrugged. "I heard you. We all did. We heard you calling down to Petra as she hung behind the ship, trapped. I heard you telling her what she had to do. You convinced her. You saved her life, James."

"But how, Dad?" James asked, almost pleading. "How did she do it? How did she break the ropes with just her mind? It was her yesterday morning too! She's the one that fixed the harness chain beneath the boat. She didn't use her wand! She doesn't..." James stopped himself, realizing he was close to breaking his promise to Petra. He'd vowed not to tell anyone her secret. "She doesn't... use a wand. Anymore. I mean, not that I've seen."

"So I have noticed," Harry replied evenly. "Merlin knows. He's told me a bit, but not very much. He is a man who keeps his own counsel."

"Can you tell me anything?"

Harry shook his head. "Not because you don't deserve to know, James, but because it wouldn't make any sense. Later, perhaps. When things are clearer."

"That's why Merlin's on this trip, then, isn't it?" James said, peering up into his father's face. "The real reason he came is to keep an eye on Petra. Isn't it?"

Harry met his son's gaze. He shook his head very faintly. "You have the mind of an Auror, James," he said seriously. "Use it well. Use it to keep yourself out of trouble. I know how hard it is to hear this, but hear it anyway: for now, there is nothing more you can do for Petra than be her friend. Whatever happens, that will be the thing she needs most."

“What’s going to happen?” James asked, not breaking his father’s gaze. “What do you know?”

“I know that you have difficulty understanding that the weight of the world isn’t yours to bear,” Harry said, with fond weariness. He smiled crookedly. “But you come by it honestly, so I can’t blame you for it.”

For a long moment, the two were silent again. James turned and looked back out at the ocean, listened to the monotonous thrash of the waves beneath the prow. After another minute, he spoke again.

“What happened back there, Dad?”

Harry seemed to know what his son was asking about. He thought about it for a moment, and then took off his glasses. “Did I ever tell you what happened on the day my mother and father were killed?” he asked mildly.

James glanced at him seriously. “Yeah,” he said slowly. “I mean, everybody knows about that. There’ve been books. Movies even.”

Harry nodded shortly. “Yes, but that’s not what really happened. It’s all just guesses, really. I mean, everyone that was there that night is dead now. Except for myself, of course. And I don’t remember any of it, fortunately. There’s only one person who really did know the truth of that night. You know who that is?”

James frowned as he thought about it. An idea occurred to him. “Dumbledore? Your old Headmaster?”

“Got it in one,” Harry said, smiling. It was a thin smile, rather sad. “Albus Dumbledore. He told me about it, although I didn’t fully understand it at the time. Maybe no one but Dumbledore himself truly could. It was old magic, after all. Old and deep. Such things aren’t taught in books and classes. They come only through wisdom. Dumbledore may not have been perfect... but he was wise.”

James blinked, unsure where this was going. “So what did he tell you?” he asked. “What really happened that night?”

Harry narrowed his eyes as he looked out at the waves. “My mother made a trade,” he said slowly. “It sounds simple, really, and yet I think it’s anything but that. I think the simple explanation is the only way we can really understand it. She made a trade. She gave her life in order to save me. When she did that, she created a kind of magic that Voldemort, in all his cruel power, could never grasp. She created a sort of contract, something that bound him, and hobbled him, something that connected him and me forever, until one of us was dead. The secret of it, the mystery of it, is in the substance of that bond, the force that made the contract unbreakable. Dumbledore told me when I was just a boy, younger than you, but it was too simple for me then. I thought he was just being sentimental. Now, I know different. Now, I know that the force he spoke of truly is the most powerful, the most inviolate and unbreakable thing in the entire universe. Tell me that you know what I am talking about.”

James did know what his father was talking about. “Love,” he answered. “Your mother’s magical contract was bound in love. Somehow. Right?”

Harry nodded again, very slowly this time. “People think love is something all light and fluffy, something dreamy. They write it in flowery pink letters, print it on cards, play wispy songs about it on flutes and harps. But that’s not what love really is, or, at least, that’s not *all* love is. Love is like chains of unbreakable steel. Love is like iron weights, heavier than the world. Love can crush just as surely as it can lift up. Everything else wilts before it. That’s what Voldemort failed to grasp, and what killed him in the end: my mother’s love, the trade she made, giving herself... for me.”

James had never heard his father talk about such things before. The story of his parents’ death was so common, so familiar to everyone in the wizarding world, that it had become almost sterile. Now, James realized, more than he ever had before, that this was something that had actually happened. His dad, the great Harry Potter, had once been a baby, defenseless and helpless, and he had required the protection of his own mother, a woman who had given the last thing, the most powerful thing, she’d known how to give: her own life, as an act of perfect love.

Next to James, his father stirred. “Like I said, it is old magic. So basic, so simple, that there is no word for it. It just is. The trade, the saving of one life by the sacrifice of another. It makes a bond, one that is unbreakable, one that forms a contract forever, just like the one that existed between me and Voldemort, the one that eventually killed him. Do you understand, James?”

James nodded. “Yeah. I mean... I guess so. But what’s this have to do with—”

“James,” Harry interrupted him, “tonight, something like that happened here, on this very ship. But different. I didn’t know for sure, not when it happened. I couldn’t see it because Merlin clouded the windows. But I sensed it. Some part of me... some buried, essential part of me... remembered the feeling of it. James, can you tell me... when Petra fell... did you see something? Something unusual?”

James felt cold to his toes. He looked at his father, his eyes wide, stunned. He didn’t need to respond. Harry saw it in his son’s eyes.

“Something happened between you and Petra. But it wasn’t a trade. I don’t know how, but you saved her, just like my mother saved me... but you did it without having to die yourself. You were willing to, though. Weren’t you?”

James still stared up at his father, unseeing now as he thought back to the events of the night. He nodded.

Harry nodded as well. “I know. You were willing to die in her stead. And somehow that triggered the magic, caused that bond to happen, even though... you *didn’t* have to die.”

When James spoke, it was in a near whisper. “But... how is that possible? Your mum was a grown witch, and by all accounts, she was excellent. How could I perform a spell as serious and powerful as what she did?”

Harry shook his head. “It isn’t that kind of magic, James. That’s why Voldemort failed in the face of it. It isn’t magic you learn. It isn’t like transfiguration or flying a broom. For those who

know love, it's just there, deep down, like an underground river, hidden and powerful. Very few witches and wizards ever have the need, or the depth of character, to call on it. You did, James. Just like my mother. You did."

"But... why did I live, then? If it's a trade...?"

Harry laid a hand on his son's shoulder. "I don't know. It's almost as if you tapped into some completely different form of magic, something beyond what we know or understand. All I know is that it happened, and... I'm proud of you, James. I can't tell you how proud I am, not just because of what you did, but because of how calm and sure you were when you did it." He sighed deeply, and then went on in a lower voice. "Neither can I tell you how relieved I was to see you and Petra come down those stairs together, wet and shaken as you were. Because for one horrid moment, I thought you were no more. I don't ever want to feel that way again. I don't think I could bear it."

James nodded. He understood very well what his father was talking about.

There didn't seem to be anything further to say. Harry put his arm around his son's shoulders and together they began to make their way to the stairs, heading back below-decks.

"Dad," James said as they moved through the darkness, "why did Merlin cover the windows? Why didn't he just use his powers to save Petra?"

Harry was silent for a long moment. James had begun to think his father wasn't going to answer at all, when he finally drew a deep breath.

"Merlinus is a mysterious and powerful wizard, James," he said carefully. "He comes from a dramatically different time. I don't understand why he does a lot of what he does. But he is very like my old Headmaster, Dumbledore, in one important way: he is wise. Wisdom does not come easily or cheaply, and it is to be respected wherever it can be found. I don't always understand Merlinus. But I respect him. He has his reasons, but they are his alone."

James was insistent. He stopped at the top of the deck stairs and turned to face his father. "Guess, Dad. Come on. You're smart. Take a guess."

Harry shook his head slowly, not in negation, but in deep thought. He looked out over the waves. "Merlin either knew that you were going to rescue Petra... or that Petra was going to be saved somehow, one way or another..." he said slowly, and then paused. Finally, he shrugged, still not meeting James' gaze. "Or, for whatever reason—and despite the fact that I hate to consider it—perhaps Merlin was willing... to allow Petra to die."

James felt a chill again. It coursed down his back, prickling his hair.

Harry saw the look on his son's face but didn't try to deny his words, nor did he add anything else to his statement. Finally, after a long thoughtful moment, the two of them descended into the warmth and light of the corridor. They said goodnight at James' door, and he climbed quietly into his bunk.

In the rocking darkness, James lifted his right hand and looked at it. The glowing silver thread was no longer visible, but he had a strong feeling that it was still there, just as real and strong as it had been earlier that night, when it had been the only thing between Petra and the rushing

waves. James had been willing to die for Petra. He hadn't known it at the time, had not consciously thought about it, but there was no doubt about it. He had been willing to trade his life for hers.

Merlin, on the other hand, might well have been willing to allow Petra to die. Incredible as it seemed, he might not have raised a single magical finger to save her. James shook his head slowly on his pillow, letting his hand thump to the bed next to him. He trusted Merlin. His experiences last year had cemented his belief in the old man's wisdom and good intent, just as James' dad had said, but what could possibly explain the fact that Merlin might have chosen not to save Petra? Suddenly, James' heart dropped and his eyes widened. What if Merlin himself had conjured the storm? Nature was his medium, after all, and the source of his powers. What if the storm really had been of magical origin, and Petra's death had been its intent?

It was completely ridiculous, of course. Merlin could be trusted. James knew that now, fully and deeply. Merlin was a good guy.

But what about Petra, James asked himself, unable to silence the voice of his deepest, most honest heart. *After all, Petra believes that she has killed. If she did, maybe Phyllis deserved it, but then again, maybe she didn't. Maybe Albus is right. Maybe the only reason Petra isn't in Azkaban is because nobody can prove what she did. Maybe Merlin was willing to let Petra die tonight because... Petra isn't good. Maybe she's bad. Worse, maybe she's bad... and powerful.*

James stopped his thoughts before they could go any further. Petra *wasn't* bad. She might be confused, and she was certainly sick in some way, but deep down she was good. He knew it. If Merlin thought otherwise—and James couldn't really know if he did, despite how things might have appeared earlier that night—then he was simply wrong.

Thinking that, James finally drifted into a fitful, restless sleep.



The next day, after breakfast, Barstow reined Henrietta in, halting the *Gwyndemere* on the rocking waves. With Dodongo's help, the crew heaved swordfish carcasses overboard, and James, Ralph, and Lucy watched as Henrietta caught them in her jaws, crunching them up whole.

"Was it like the glowing rope you saw last year?" Ralph asked quietly. "In the cave, when we went to get Merlin's cache?"

James shook his head. "No. That started out as a sunbeam, and then turned into a plain old rope, made out of some kind of gold stuff. This was like... like a thread spun out of moonlight."

Ralph frowned. "What do you think, Lu?"

"I think Uncle Harry was right about what he told James. It's old magic. Not everybody can tap into it. And when they do, it's not like something you can control. It'd be like trying to bottle a lightning bolt."

"What about Petra, though?" James said, glancing between the two of them. "She does magic without a wand! Is that... normal?"

"It isn't *normal*, of course," Lucy replied. "But it isn't completely unheard of. Lots of people practice wandless magic, as a sort of hobby. It's just very hard to manage. The wand focuses magic, like a magnifying glass can focus a sunbeam and turn it into a torch. Maybe Petra's just especially talented."

Ralph looked around to make sure no one was nearby, and then said in a low voice, "I'm more worried about the bit where she told you someone or *something* was following her around. I mean, is she just being paranoid? Or is there really somebody after her? And maybe the rest of us too?"

"If it really was someone evil," Lucy mused, "then Merlin would have felt it. He's dead powerful that way. Still, there *was* that scary moment when the pirate ships nearly captured us all. Maybe that's what she was thinking of."

Both Ralph and Lucy looked at James, but he merely shrugged and shook his head.

Shortly, Barstow ordered the hatches closed again in preparation for the last leg of the ocean journey. "That's my girl, Henrietta," he called down affectionately. "Just a wee bit further, then Dodongo will put in his little bit and give you a well-deserved break."

Henrietta frolicked in the water, swimming in massive circles and figures of eight, her humps slicing through the waves. She thrashed her tail and flung seawater from her great, scaly head. Finally, Barstow climbed into the brass chair, whistling.

"Want to man the reins one more time, James?" he called down, grinning. "Last chance before landfall!"

James shook his head, but couldn't help smiling. "No thanks."

"Suit yourself," Barstow said, shrugging. He called a short incantation and the magical fishing line pulsed once. Henrietta lunged forward and the boat lurched behind her, rising onto the waves.

As the journey neared its end, James found that the thrill of it had finally worn off. He was eager to reach land again and found himself lurking around the bow as the day progressed, watching the horizon for any sign of their destination. Ralph accompanied him sometimes, as did Albus and Lucy. After lunch, Petra joined him, leading Izzy at her side. The three sat cross-legged on the deck, leaning against the railing, talking idly about what the United States might be like. Interestingly, Petra seemed to be feeling rather better, to the point where she almost seemed like her old self. She laughed as they spoke, and James was glad to hear it. He wanted to ask her about the magic, about how she did it without her wand, but he didn't. Later, he would, but not now. The timing just wasn't right.

Finally, as the sun began its descent back toward the horizon, James heard a babble of voices and looked up. Persephone Remora and her gaggle of fellow travelers were climbing onto the bow, squinting in the sunlight, their faces pale as gravestones.

"Yes, my friends, I believe you are correct," Remora announced, lifting her face to the breeze. "I can smell it as well. The dark purple scent of lifeblood is thick on the wind. We are very nearly home."

James sighed and rolled his eyes. He stood and threaded through the black-clothed figures, heading below-decks. He sensed the teenagers looking at him as he passed, their faces sly and sarcastic.

Later, James, along with his fellow travelers, climbed a circular stairway to the top of the deckhouse, eager to catch their first glimpse of the United States. James elbowed in between Albus and Lucy at the railing, watching as an irregular dark shape grew on the horizon. Below, the bow looked very small and narrow. James could clearly see Henrietta carving the waves up ahead, her long lithe body rippling just under the rushing surface.

"Are you excited?" Lucy asked, leaning eagerly over the railing, her dark eyes sparkling. "I sure am. I can't wait to get there."

"Why are you so hopped up about it, Lu?" Albus asked. "You've traveled all over the world."

"Sure," Lucy answered, shrugging, "but that was the world. This is the United States. For better or worse, there's no other place quite like it."

Albus scoffed darkly. "The same thing can be said about James' clothes hamper."

"Look," Molly cried suddenly, pointing. "Over there, just to the left of the bow. See? Buildings! That's the skyline! We're nearly there!"

James looked. He wasn't sure he was seeing the same thing Molly was seeing, but it was exciting nonetheless. The great landmass grew and spread, slowly expanding to fill the entire western horizon. As the fog of distance dissipated, James began to recognize the shapes of a great city. Buildings towered up toward the sky, clumped together like stacks of gigantic toy blocks. Finally, as they got close enough for James to make out the faces of individual skyscrapers and to recognize the shapes of other ships clustered around the sprawling ports, Barstow halted the *Gwyndemere*. Deftly, he used his own wand to release Henrietta from her harness chain. A few quick commands and

words of praise sent the great sea serpent curling down under the boat, where she would apparently hide for the landward side of the journey. Much more slowly, then, the *Gwyndemere* began to creep forward, propelled by Dodongo's dutiful pedaling below-decks. James turned and saw the smokestack behind him issuing a stream of black smoke: the giant ape's last huge cigar, of course. He grinned, and then turned back to the approaching land.

"The Statue of Liberty," Harry announced from behind James. James saw it, standing tall and straight before the massive city, faint in the misty distance. The statue seemed to regard them mildly, her torch raised high overhead, glinting gold as the sun shone on it. Behind James, his father sighed and said, rather more quietly. "The United States. What would Severus Snape say, I wonder."

"He'd say to keep one hand on your wand and the other on your wallet," Albus said, grinning crookedly.

"We're nearly to port," Percy announced briskly, clapping his hands together. "I suggest we all head below and make ourselves ready. The journey isn't over yet! We've still a way to go before nightfall, and our escorts will be meeting us at customs."

James turned aside, peering around Ralph toward his cousin Lucy. "Is your dad always this chipper when he's traveling?"

Lucy nodded somberly. "He thrives on it. The good part is that we can always leave him to manage all the business of it and just enjoy the sights ourselves. Should be interesting."

"Famous last words," Albus said, narrowing his eyes.

Slowly, James and his family and friends began to thread back down the spiral stairway. By the time they had lugged their trunks back onto the main deck, they were very nearly at port. The shadows of the skyscrapers fell over the *Gwyndemere* as she angled into a narrow inlet, surrounded by massive cargo ships and rusty tugboats. Gulls soared and lofted on the air currents, calling derisively over the waves. The air was thick with the mingled smells of dead fish, seaweed, and, unfortunately, garbage. James turned to watch as a huge barge of rubbish lumbered past them, piled high and surrounded by its own cloud of screeching gulls.

"I hope this isn't a sign of things to come," Ralph said, staring up at the stinking piles of trash.

"Buck up, Ralph," Petra said, coming up behind them and smiling. "A city that can afford to throw that much rubbish away must be a city worth seeing, right?"

Ralph shook his head uncertainly. "If you say so."

"I do," Petra said, and something in her voice made James turn around. To his eyes, Petra certainly didn't appear sick anymore, and the sight made his heart rejoice. She drew in a great, contented breath and let it out slowly, looking up at the towering, glittering buildings. "New York," she said on the exhale, narrowing her eyes slightly. "You know what they call it, don't you?"

James shook his head, smiling at her with bemusement.

“They call it The City that Never Sleeps,” she answered herself, nodding with approval. “I like that. I like it very much.”

James couldn't stop looking at her. To him, she was very nearly radiant. Beyond her, the buildings loomed and glimmered, casting their shadows over her, sparkling in the setting sun.

Somewhere nearby, a tugboat sounded its horn. James barely heard it.



The next half hour went past in a blur of bustling crowds, echoing announcements, long queues, and flashing signs. James drifted through it all in a sort of dazed wonder, glad that his dad and Uncle Percy seemed to be managing the various questions, connections, and directions. The American wizarding customs agent didn't even look up as James moved in front of the high counter, following Lucy and Izzy.

“Name,” the man said, holding out his hand, palm up. James had been watching, so he knew what to do. He dropped his wand into the man's hand.

“James Sirius Potter,” he called through the noise of the crowd.

“Reason for visiting the United States?” the agent asked in a bored monotone.

“I'm here with my dad, Harry Potter,” James answered. He was satisfied to see the agent blink and look up at him over his glasses. It was a brief look, but James knew what it meant. Even here, Harry Potter was a well-known figure.

“Are you transporting any fruit, vegetables, potions, beasts, insects, cursed objects, or forbidden artifacts into the United States?”

“No,” James said, and then added, “er, I have an owl. Nobby. Does he count?”

“Service animals are permitted, so long as they can pass a routine health inspection,” the agent said, holding James’ wand under a large magnifying glass. Smoky shapes on the glass resolved into letters, and James craned to read them. He was interested to see that the letters spelled out the last several spells he had performed—mostly levitations, but also the hiding spells he had used on Petra’s letter—as well as the construction and core details of his wand. The agent quickly jotted James’ name on a much-used chalkboard and the letters appeared a moment later on the magnifying glass, beneath the information about his wand. The agent turned and handed the wand back to James over the counter.

“Are you a registered or undocumented werewolf, Animagus, Metamorphmagus, vampire, shape-shifter, or beast-whisperer?” he said, rattling off the words as if he had asked the same question a million times before, which he probably had.

James tried to replay the question in his head. “Er, I don’t think so,” he answered.

“Welcome to the United States,” the agent said, unsmiling. “And good luck, Mr. Potter.”

“Er, thanks.” James replied. As he moved forward in line, making room for Ralph to hand over his own unusually large wand, James turned and saw his father at an adjacent queue, behind Merlin and in front of his mum. They were all talking, their heads close together.

Finally, the signs and queues opened up into a broad lobby with high vaulted ceilings and moving advertisements framed on the walls. Witches and wizards crowded the space, some flying overhead on brooms, zooming in and out through a bank of very tall doorways set into the far wall. As James peered around at the milling crowd, he was not exactly surprised to see a wide variety of ethnicities, clothing styles, and even animals, all milling through the gigantic space like ants.

On the other side of the space, near the doors, a Bigfoot wearing a backpack and a pair of dark sunglasses lumbered along, towering over those around him. Nearby, a dark-skinned wizard in a red fez stooped over an open carpet bag. He produced a length of white rope, which he deftly tossed into the air, where it caught and hung on nothing. Without pausing, the man closed his carpet bag, scooped it onto his shoulder, and, to James’ complete amazement, began to climb the rope. As he reached the top, he vanished into thin air, taking his carpet bag with him. A moment later, the rope zipped upwards, disappearing as well.

“Wicked...,” Ralph said appreciatively, standing next to James, his eyes wide.

James nodded and felt excitement bubbling up in him. Together, they followed Percy and Neville Longbottom toward a bank of grand marble stairs and the doors beyond.

“Hey,” Ralph said suddenly, pushing himself up on his toes to peer over the crowd, “isn’t that Chancellor Franklyn over there? On the landing over to the right?”

James peered around Neville’s shoulder and grinned. “It is! And look who’s with him!”

“James!” a voice cried out over the noise of the throng. “Ralph! Hey, over here!”

James and Ralph pushed through the crowd, laughing with delight. James leapt up the stairs, taking them two at a time to the nearest landing, where a small group of people stood watching. “Zane!” he called. “I didn’t know you were coming!”

“Are you kidding?” Zane said, matching James’ grin. “I was planning to stow away in the baggage compartment if Chancellor Franklyn wasn’t going to let me come. How are you doing, you guys? Good to see you!”

James reached to shake Zane’s hand, but Zane grabbed James around the shoulder and pulled him into a rough half-embrace.

“Oof,” James said, laughing. “I forget how touchy-feely you lot are. We’re good. Glad to finally be here.”

“Hey Zane!” Ralph smiled, huffing up the last of the stairs to the landing. “Nice country you got here.”

“You just wait,” Zane said, approaching Ralph and throwing an arm around the bigger boy’s shoulders. “I’m going to show you all around. You’ll love it. But first, intros…” He turned aside, gesturing toward the people standing nearby. “That’s Chancellor Franklyn, of course, who you already know.”

Franklyn nodded at James and Ralph. “Boys,” he said, smiling. “It’s good to see you both again, and rather grown-up, I daresay. I trust you’ve been practicing up on your defensive techniques. It looks like I may be overseeing your education again this year, if I am not mistaken.”

James nodded, but Zane went on, interrupting him before he could reply. “Next to him, that’s Professor Georgia Burke. She teaches Mug-Occ and Magizoology. You might have her this year if you’re lucky. She lets us pet the tufted rattlebacks, even though it’s technically a violation of the health code. The rest of these mugs are just T.A.s and admin, here to take a few pictures of the big city. Like me,” Zane finished, grinning. “Which reminds me, here, what’s your name?”

Lucy blinked at Zane as she reached the landing. “I’m Lucy Weasley,” she replied. “Who are you?”

“Pleased to meet you, Lucy. I’m Zane. You know these two? Troublemakers, aren’t they? Here, would you mind taking a picture of the three of us?”

James stifled a grin as Zane shoved a large camera into Lucy’s hands.

“Just push the red button on the top right,” he said, backing away and throwing an arm each around James and Ralph. “But you have to hold it down for a second so the flash will work.”

“I know how to operate a camera,” Lucy commented, rolling her eyes. She raised the camera and peered through the viewfinder.

“Say ‘cheese!’” Zane announced, showing all his teeth to the camera.

The camera flashed as Ralph and James both said ‘cheese’.

“Speaking of which,” Albus said, climbing the stairs next to his parents, “here’s our cheesy American friend.”

“Good to see you, Zane” Harry said, patting Zane roughly on the shoulder. “Still tearing it up on the Quidditch pitch?”

“I wish,” Zane replied, shaking his head. “These guys don’t have any respect for the game over here. Here, it’s all Quodpot and Clutch. We have a team, but it’s nothing like when I played with the Ravenclaws.” He sighed, and then brightened. “Hi Petra! I didn’t know you were coming.”

Petra beamed at Zane, walking with Izzy at her side. “I don’t think anybody knew for sure until we were underway,” she answered, shrugging.

“Harry,” Benjamin Franklyn said warmly, reaching to shake hands. “So good to see you again. I only wish it were under better circumstances. And this must be the lovely Ginevra?”

“Pleased to meet you, Chancellor,” James’ mum said, smiling.

“Do call me Benjamin,” Franklyn said, showing her his most charming smile.

“Chancellor,” Percy said, sidling between them and reaching for Franklyn’s hand. “A pleasure, as always. You’ve met my wife, Audrey, of course. And this is Denniston Dolohov, Neville Longbottom, and finally, last but not least…”

“Merlinus Ambrosius,” Franklyn interjected, looking up at the tall wizard. “Yes, of course. We barely had the chance to speak when last we met. Things were rather hectic, of course. I look forward to a more relaxed interview this time, although I am certain it won’t be as long as I might hope.”

“Chancellor,” Merlin nodded in greeting. “I assure you, this will likely be the first of many visits. I wish to know much about this country of yours. But we will make the best use of what time we have.”

Greetings and introductions continued all around, but James grew bored with them and stopped paying attention. Finally, Neville spoke up.

“Begging everyone’s pardon, but I, for one, am anxious to reach our final destination. Might we continue our conversation as we move on?”

“Certainly, Mr. Longbottom,” Franklyn agreed. “We are only awaiting one more person. Well, in a manner of speaking.”

Harry looked around at everyone in his troop. “I believe we are all present and accounted for, Chancellor. Are you quite sure?”

“Indeed I am,” Franklyn nodded. “Pardon the confusion. She is one of our own, in fact. Just now returning, by happenstance, from a summer trip abroad with some of her students.”

“Here she comes now,” Zane said, sighing in annoyance. “Don’t tell me you guys had to travel with *her*.”

James turned, frowning quizzically, just in time to see Persephone Remora climbing the steps to the landing, her long black cloak flowing dramatically around her, creating a wake through the moving crowd.

“Ah,” she sighed. “Returned so soon. It seems as if we barely just left. Greetings, Chancellor, Georgia. Forgive me if we seem less than enthused to see you. It is always rather a strain to come back from our land of origin. Pray, don’t take it personally.”

“Welcome home, Professor Remora,” Franklyn announced. “No offense taken whatsoever. We, too, know what it is like to be away from our homeland. As do our European friends here. I take it most of you have already met?”

“*Professor* Remora?” James said incredulously, turning back to Zane and Ralph.

“Yeah,” Zane said under his breath. “Forbidden Practices and Cursology. Don’t get me started. She’s a real treat.”

“Huh,” Ralph said, peering aside at the woman and her pasty-faced students. “I wouldn’t have guessed that.”

James shook his head. “He’s being sarcastic, Ralph. It’s an American thing. Remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Ralph said, nodding. “That makes more sense, then.”

“Friends,” Franklyn announced, gesturing toward the bank of doors behind him, “let us be off!”

Slowly, the group made its way up the last flight of stairs, moving into the sunset light of the doors. James craned to see around Neville Longbottom, eager for his first glimpse of the city beyond.

“I was speechless when I first saw this place,” Zane enthused happily. “I mean, as a wizard, of course. I’d been to New York loads of times before, when I was growing up, but I never knew it had a magical twin. Still, I think I always sort of expected it, you know?”

“What do you mean ‘a magical twin?’” Ralph asked, glancing aside as they neared the doors.

Zane blinked aside at him. “You don’t know already?”

“My dad visited Alma Aleron last summer,” Ralph replied, “but he came via Portkey. I don’t think he made it to New York at all.”

“Oh man,” Zane said, shaking his head and grinning. “Hold onto your wands, then, guys. This is gonna blow your minds.”

The view finally opened before them as James, Zane, and Ralph stepped out into the lowering sunlight. Before them, a paved thoroughfare led through an ornate arched gate. Wrought-iron letters crafted into the arch spelled out the words ‘*e magicus pluribus unum*’. Beyond the gate, looming high into the sunset, James was not surprised to see the shapes of glittering skyscrapers and steel towers. What did surprise him, however, so much so that he stopped in his tracks, his mouth dropping open, was the swarm of flying vehicles, broomed witches and wizards, and glowing magical

signs and moving billboards that overlaid the buildings, reaching high up into their narrow, urban canyons.

For the first time, James noticed that nearly every skyscraper was topped with another building, smaller and older, as if a much more antiquated city had been pushed upwards by the newer buildings, like birds' nests in trees. Witches and wizards circled these buildings, perching on elaborate wooden scaffoldings that extended from, and even connected, most of the skyscrapers. In the center of it all, dominating the entire skyline, was a building so bright and transparent that it appeared to be constructed entirely of glass. As James watched, he could see people moving about inside it, riding in shimmering elevators or working over tiny semi-transparent desks.

“Welcome, friends,” Franklyn said, looking up and smiling proudly. “Welcome... to New Amsterdam.”

With that ends chapter five. 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 what's happened thus far.