



8. THE VAULT OF DESTINIES

It was amazing, James reflected the next day, how similar life at Hogwarts and life at Alma Aleron could be while being so simultaneously completely different.

He and Ralph had spent most of the previous afternoon in the basement of Hermes Mansion wearing their ridiculous propeller beanies and being grilled by senior members of the Zombies about why they should be allowed to join, all the while crawling around on the basement's ratty carpets and poking into the dusty rafters in search of spiders, which they were instructed to collect and save in a large jar. James had half worried that part of their initiation would include eating the spiders that they were in the process of collecting and had purposely avoiding capturing several of the larger ones. By ten o'clock, Zane had been there as well, munching a huge bowl of popcorn with his feet kicked up on an old footstool covered in yellow shag carpeting. Warrington, who by then had chosen to be referred to as 'High Sultan Warrington, Master of the Fighting Freemdugs of the Second-Floor Sectional Couch', had inspected Ralph's and James' jar of spiders with a critical eye. Dozens of the arachnids scrambled over each other in the bottom of the jar, their tiny legs making a slightly maddening scritch-scratching sound on the glass.

"Not bad, pledges," Warrington had proclaimed reluctantly. "You got sixteen more than Zane here did on his first night."

"No fair!" Zane had exclaimed, sitting upright in the old recliner by the stairs. "There's two of them!"

“Yeah,” Warrington had grinned, unscrewing the lid of the jar. “But you cheated, Walker. You transfigured half of your spiders out of ants, centipedes, and even a few stale potato chips. Most of them didn’t even have the right number of legs.”

Zane had slumped backwards in the chair again. “That’s what you all loved about me, if I recall. Creative cheating is a Zombie core value. You told me so yourself.”

“Indeed I did,” Warrington had nodded, upending the jar over the stained carpet. The spiders had poured out and scrambled away in all directions, scuttling under the furniture and into dark corners.

“What’d you do that for?” Ralph had exclaimed, his eyes bulging. James had noticed that the propeller on Ralph’s head spun faster when he was agitated. It had very nearly lifted him off the floor when he’d discovered the black widow’s nest in the shadow of the stairs.

“Sorry, pledges,” Warrington had replied soberly. “It’s purely catch-and-release in Zombie House. Otherwise, what will the next batch of pledges have to chase after? Why, some of those spiders are like family by now.”

“I remember the big orange and purple one from my first night here,” Zane had said wistfully. “I found it on my pillow wearing a pair of fake plastic fangs.”

The room had erupted into gales of appreciative laughter and Warrington had grinned indulgently at Zane.

Shortly, James and Ralph had been dismissed, accompanied by the well wishes and encouragement of Zane, who’d told them that he thought the evening had gone splendidly well.

“You two are shoo-ins,” he’d said as he walked them to the path in front of Hermes Mansion. “Really. Warrington likes you, otherwise he’d have made you personally return every spider to its nest. As long as you accomplish tomorrow’s pledge dare, you’ll be in like lint.”

James had asked Zane what the dare would be, but Zane had shaken his head. “If I knew, I’d tell you, but I don’t. Since you only got here during the last few days of pledge week, it’ll probably be a big one. But you can pull it off. Don’t sweat it.”

James tried not to think about it as he and Ralph made their way across the dark campus.

The common dorm was a stone block construction that loomed like a giant mausoleum in the shadow of the guest house, with no lanterns to light it and nearly every window dark. In the tiny entryway, James and Ralph found their trunks and Nobby’s battered cage, inside of which the great owl eyed James balefully.

“Sorry, Nobby,” James soothed, kneeling in front of the cage and opening the door. “I nearly forgot all about you. Go on outside and get some dinner, but don’t go far. I’ll find out tomorrow where they keep owls around here.”

The owl hopped out of the cage and ruffled his feathers. With a disgruntled hoot, he spread his wings and took off through the open front door.

“There’s a note from your mum,” Ralph said, taking an envelope from the top of his trunk. “It’s addressed to all of us. You, me, Lucy, and Albus.”

James plopped onto his trunk and pulled the beanie from his head. “Go ahead and read it,” he said, flapping a hand vaguely.

Ralph drew the note from the unsealed envelope and unfolded it. “Dear children,” he began, and then looked at James. “Children?”

“Just go on,” James prodded, shaking his head wearily.

“I hope you’ve settled in OK with your classes and house assignments. We all miss you already, although we’ll be sure to see you tomorrow night at Professor Longbottom’s assembly. Your new school uniforms are in your trunks. Be good and we’ll see you tomorrow. Love, blah, blah, blah, she put everybody’s names here, even Headmaster Merlin.”

“That’s my mum,” James smiled crookedly.

“There’s something written on the back,” Ralph said, turning the note over. “It’s from Lucy. She says... she’s spending the night at Vampire House with her new mates, and then she writes ‘I’ll probably see you three at class in the morning if you don’t sleep in or skip it or forget you’re on American time now’. Blimey, she can be a nag, can’t she?”

James shrugged. “That’s how the women in my family show love, I think.”

“You think Albus is already here somewhere,” Ralph asked, grunting as he lugged his trunk toward a rickety dumbwaiter built into the wall next to the staircase. A very tarnished brass statue of a monkey in a bellhop uniform stood on a shelf next to the dumbwaiter door.

“I don’t know,” James sighed, standing and hefting his own trunk. “Maybe he got lucky like Lucy and is spending the night at his new house.”

Ralph socked his trunk into the large dumbwaiter compartment and James used his wand to levitate his own on top of Ralph’s. The brass monkey sprang jerkily to life, squeaking as if it desperately needed to be oiled. It clambered into the dumbwaiter, sidling next to the stacked trunks, and pulled the door shut. A moment later, a ratcheting noise marked the compartment’s ascent into the floors above.

“How does it know where to go?” James asked, peering at the closed door. Ralph shrugged and the two of them struck off in search of the bathrooms.

The common dormitory turned out to be just as dank, moldy, and woefully outdated as Zane had implied. When Ralph turned on the faucets, a mixture of rusty orange water, dirt, and the occasional worm spilled out, and continued for several minutes while the boys let it run. Finally, they satisfied themselves by heading back outside and splashing off in a nearby fountain. In the center of the fountain, a monstrous birdbath seemed to regard them coolly from the eyes of a half dozen stone gargoyles.

“Foreigners,” one of the gargoyles muttered, rolling its eyes.

Ralph and James chucked pinecones at the statues for a few minutes, but soon realized that nothing is quite as imperturbable as a stone gargoyle. Eventually, exhausted, the boys stumped back inside and, after a short search, found their trunks kicked out onto the hallway carpet of the top floor. There, they found an empty dormitory room and dropped immediately to sleep on the ancient, bowed beds.

The next day, James and Ralph's first class was Wizard Home Economics, which was held in the cellars of the Administration Hall, in what, for all intents and purposes, appeared to be a converted dungeon. Low vaulted ceilings were supported by squat pillars, and James had the unsettling sense that he could feel the weight of the massive building above, pressing down on the space. All in all, he found the classroom nearly indistinguishable from some of the more cobwebbed classrooms at Hogwarts.

The Wiz Home Ec teacher was a fat, wizened old witch with rosy cheeks, frizzy white hair that seemed to have a very rich life of its own, and sparkling black eyes that darted over the classroom mischievously, as if she wasn't exactly sure if she wanted to teach the children or cook them in an enormous pie. Her name, as it turned out, was Professor Betsy Bartholemew Ryvenwicke Newton, however she instructed her students to refer to her merely as Mother Newt. Smiling in a grandmotherly fashion, she began to stack cauldrons, pots, and pans on her expansive desk, launching into an introductory explanation of the class. Zane, who sat between James and Ralph at a table in the rear of the room, leaned aside to James.

"She may look like last decade's cinnamon bun," he whispered behind his hand, "but don't mess with old Ma Newt. She's as tough as a Bigfoot's heel callus and twice as stinky if you get her riled up."

Ralph slumped in his seat and fiddled with his quill. "Isn't Home Ec a girlie class?" he whispered gloomily, but Zane interrupted him, shushing urgently and holding a finger to his lips.

"What's that?" Mother Newt asked suddenly, interrupting herself at the front of the classroom. She raised her chin and peered over the heads of the students. Her black gaze found Zane and she offered him a rather charming smile. "A question, Mr. Walker?"

"No, no," Zane replied, grinning a little manically. "It's nothing."

"Someone back there implied that Wizarding Home Economics is... I'm sorry," she said, frowning slightly. "My poor hearing isn't what it used to be. What did your friend call it?"

"Er..." Ralph muttered, his face turning dark red. "Er, er... I was just asking. I'm new here."

Mother Newt nodded comfortingly, closing her eyes. "Yes, yes. Mr. Deedle, from our wizarding neighbors across the sea. I've heard much about you and your friends. What was it you were wondering, young man? Don't be shy with your old Mother Newt."

Emboldened, Ralph sat up a little. "Well," he said, glancing around. The eyes of the rest of the class had all turned to him, most wide and serious. One or two students shook their heads very

faintly, warningly. Ralph gulped and went on. “I, er... I always thought... pardon me for saying... that home economics was a girl’s study.”

“Oh no,” Mother Newt answered soothingly, smiling again. “A common misconception, dear boy, I assure you. No, you see, the truth is...” here, the professor stepped away from her desk, backing into the shadows of the high cupboards that lined the dungeon’s front wall, “the truth is that Home Economics is not at all a *girl’s* study... it is, in fact, a *woman’s* study.”

In the shadows, Newt raised her hands swiftly, and the sleeves of her robes fell back, revealing surprisingly lean, strong arms. “Home economics is more than a mere class. It is the lifetime pursuit of only the most rare and powerful woman. A fierce, *cunning* woman, a witch whose wiles are without depth, whose motives are infinitely unplottable, and whose boundless potential is kept in check only by her own willing discipline...”

Lightning crackled from Newt’s upraised wand and her fingertips, licking along the faces of the cabinets. Her voice lowered, but grew louder, echoing. “The sort of witch whose minions exist only at her tolerance, only to serve her unknowable whims, moved either by fear of her or love for her, forever beguiled and bewitched, whether they *know* it... or *not!*”

Thunder boomed suddenly in the enclosed space of the dungeon and a cold gust of wind swirled around the room, clapping the cupboard doors and snuffing out candles in the wall sconces. At their desks, students held onto their parchments and quills as the wind rushed over them, streaming through the girls’ hair and flapping the boys’ ties. A skeleton on a metal stand in the corner rattled and swayed. Its jaw clacked as if it was laughing. A moment later, as quickly as it had begun, the wind ceased. The lighting in the room returned to normal. With a series of small pops, the extinguished candles relit themselves.

“Does that answer your question, my dear?” Newt said sweetly, smiling in front of her desk once again, as if she had not moved an inch.

“Y-yes ma’am,” Ralph said quickly, sitting bolt upright in his seat. “Clear as crystal.”

“Good,” Mother Newt replied warmly, her eyes twinkling. “Now where were we? Oh yes, the basic essentials of any magical kitchen, beginning with ladles. Do pay attention, students. There may be a quiz.”

Forty minutes later, as the class shuffled out into the low hallway, each bearing a miniature poisonberry muffin that Mother Newt had helped them prepare in the classroom’s goblinfire oven, Zane explained, “Ma Newt is the President of Pixie House. Theirs is the big gingerbread mansion, Aphrodite Heights, up on the hill behind the theater. She’s a good example of why you don’t want to underestimate a Pixie even if they *do* look like a bunch of frosted lemon cookies.”

“I’ve met a few Pixies,” Lucy said falling in line next to the three boys. “I don’t think most of them are like Mother Newt. *She’s* got issues.”

Zane laughed. “Oh, you’ve got no idea. Trust me.”

James eyed the miniature muffin in his hand. “Are these safe to eat? I mean... poisonberry?”

“It’s just a name,” Zane shrugged, adjusting his backpack. “Like plaguepoppies or deathshrooms. They’re delicious. On the other hand, if anyone tries to get you to eat a blisscake... watch out.”

“Have any of you seen Albus?” Lucy asked, climbing the stone steps to the Administration Hall’s long foyer.

Zane nodded. “I saw him this morning in the cafeteria, following around a gang of senior Werewolves. They had him carrying all their trays, balancing them like it was some kind of circus trick. I was pretty impressed, to tell you the truth. He was levitating the last one with his wand between his teeth.”

“He’ll get in,” Lucy said confidently. “Albus is tenacious when he wants to be.”

“Tenacious is one way to put it,” James commented, shaking his head.

At the Administration Hall stairs, Lucy bid the boys goodbye and headed off to the Tower of Art for her Wizlit class. As the three boys made their way across campus to the Applied Magical Sciences Building, a figure trotted up to them over a nearby lawn. James glanced aside and saw that it was Warrington.

“Hey Walker,” he called. “Pledges. Hold up a minute.”

James and Ralph stopped and began to mumble, “Yes, oh High Sultan Warrington, Leader of the—”

“Can it,” Warrington interrupted. “Listen up. Your pledge dare is all set, and tonight’s the night. You’ll find everything you need in a trash can behind the common dorm. Look for the one with the big yellow ‘Z’ hexed onto its side. Walker, you get them started, all right? You’ll know what to do. But don’t help them!”

“Aye aye, captain,” Zane said, smacking the back of his hand to his forehead.

“But tonight’s Professor Longbottom’s assembly,” James said, turning to Zane as Warrington trotted away again. “We can’t miss that!”

“That’s this *evening*,” Zane said, shaking his head. “When a Zombie says ‘tonight’, what he really means is, oh, sometime in the wee hours of the next morning. Get the picture?”

“Ah,” James replied, frowning a little.

Ralph looked worried. “So what’s the dare, then?”

“We’ll know when we peek into the garbage can behind the common dorm,” Zane answered simply. “No time now, though. We’ve got Mageography next, and Professor Wimrinkle is known to dock grades for tardiness. He’s wound so tight he squeaks when he walks. Come on.”

Mageography was held in a huge round room in the base of the Applied Magical Sciences Building’s dome. The floor was terraced like an amphitheater, lined with tables and chairs. Enormous maps surrounded the upper reaches of the room, floating in bulky gilded frames. James was not surprised to see that the map images, most of which were ancient, hand-drawn in faded

browns, reds, and greens, moved very slightly. They were enchanted, of course, showing the movements of the rivers and oceans, and even the ant-like crawl of tiny boats and magical vehicles.

“I hear that if you use a special magnifying glass,” Zane whispered, heading toward a seat in the middle terrace, “that you can see tiny people moving in the cities and stuff. You could probably even find yourself if you looked hard enough.”

“That must be what my dad meant,” Ralph replied thoughtfully. “He told me that one of the purposes of school was to find yourself.”

James groaned and Zane rolled his eyes. Ralph looked affronted.

As the three settled into their seats and produced their parchments and quills, James saw Albus saunter into an entrance on the other side of the room. He spotted James, Ralph, and Zane and waved, grinning. Behind him, a tall boy in a slate gray uniform gave him a little shove. Albus lurched forward amiably and moved to a seat in the front row followed by three severe-looking Werewolf House students. One of them was the dark girl that had met them outside of the Administration Hall the previous day.

“Looks like Al’s doing all right,” Zane muttered.

James peered down at his brother. “How can you tell?”

Zane shrugged simply. “No bruises that I can see. Always a good sign with Werewolf House.”

Professor Wimrinkle entered the room from a door near his desk. He was very old, stooped, and wore very thick black spectacles which magnified his eyes so much that he looked rather perpetually surprised. He placed his leather portfolio neatly onto the desk and, without preamble, announced in a loud voice, “Number four nib quills, please, and a single sheet of forty weight parchment. Today: the Nile Delta and surrounding lowlands.”

The professor adjusted his glasses studiously as one of the maps drifted down from the upper reaches of the room, moving into place behind his desk.

“For new students, I will only say this once: I do not allow Quick-Quotes Quills or recording charms in this class. You will pay attention, and you will kindly take your own notes and draw your own maps. As the rest of you know, there is no point in my telling you that talking out of turn is forbidden in my class. If you intend to receive a passing grade, you will be so busy keeping up with me that there will be no time for you to open your mouths. Questions will be submitted to my secretary, where they will be answered during scheduled office hours. And now...”

Wimrinkle lifted his wand, which telescoped into a long pointer. He clacked its tip to a point on the map without looking. “The Nile river is generally considered to be the longest river in the world,” he said in a loud monotone, “and the home to some of the magical world’s most exotic and interesting creatures and fishes, none of which we shall be discussing. The river’s flow rate is approximately thirty-seven thousand square feet per second, resulting in a geographical delta shift of fifteen degrees average every year, which in turn results in a hydromagical plottability meter of two-

point-oh-seven gigapokuses every eight years. As you might imagine, this leads to a terrain hexology rating of, can anyone tell me? Anyone?”

No one in the room seemed eager to attempt an answer and the professor didn't seem at all surprised. He answered his own question and plowed onward, his voice echoing in the high dome overhead. James scribbled notes furiously, trying to keep up.

Sighing, he realized for the first time just how sorely he was going to miss Rose and her prodigious note taking during this school year.



The rest of the day went by in a blur. James, Ralph, and Zane had lunch in the school's cafeteria, which was located in the topmost basement level of Administration Hall. Its mint green brick walls, tiny windows set at ceiling height, long lines of students carrying metal trays, and overpowering smell of milk and goulash made James feel as if he had been transported to the mess hall in Azkaban. The noise of the chattering students was like a flock of magpies, ringing in the room's low confines.

“So the original builders of Administration Hall were dwarves,” Zane said, raising his voice over the noisome throng. “Excellent guys to have around for any construction project but with interesting views about use of space. I learned about them in Magi-American History. According to the dwarves, the Muggle building model is a weed, with most of the structure above the ground and very little root. The wizard building model is a turtle: low and secret, with a wide foundation. Dwarves, though, their building model is an iceberg.”

“Ninety percent below the surface?” Ralph clarified around a mouthful of goulash.

Zane nodded. “There's more sub-basements, cellars, and dungeons in this place than anyone can count. I've heard stories about students going exploring into the lower stairwells and finding

whole tribes of giant rats, entrances to huge underground rivers, even forbidden rooms with doors the size of dinosaurs and magical glowing locks that no one can open.”

James was impressed. “Have you seen any of those things?”

“No,” Zane sighed sorrowfully. “Everything below the upper dungeons is prohibited and guarded by some ancient old witch none of us has ever seen. They call her Crone Laosa. Apparently she’s the stuff nightmares are made of. Fairy tale evil, if you know what I mean.”

Ralph looked sideways at Zane. “Like, she’ll catch you and turn you into a frog until some princess kisses you?”

Zane narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “Like, she’ll catch you and turn you into a cockroach until some lunch lady squashes you with her heel.”

“I see,” Ralph nodded wisely. “So, stay out of the lower levels.”

As James moved through the rest of the day in his plain black blazer and tie, he couldn’t help feeling noticeably colorless amidst all the other students’ uniforms. He hoped that tonight’s pledge dare would turn out all right so that by the next day, he could begin wearing Zombie yellow and finally fit in.

When his afternoon free period came, James found himself pleasantly distracted from his stroll to the library by the sight of his dad walking along in the sunlight, accompanied by Merlin and Denniston Dolohov. James shouldered his backpack and ran to catch up to the group as they paced along the mall, led by Chancellor Franklyn.

“Of course, with the campus moving about in time as it does,” Franklyn was saying, “Alma Aleron functionally occupies a temporal fluxstream that would otherwise be used for storing our chronological history...”

James fell in step next to his father, who glanced down at him, blinked in surprise, and then smiled. Without a word, he rested his hand on his son’s shoulder as they walked together.

“In summary,” Franklyn went on, not noticing James’ arrival, “with our history displaced by our curious use of time, we have been pressed to store our chronological timeline in another, more conventional space. The result is here before us, in the guise of the Official Alma Aleron Hall of Historical Archives.”

Franklyn stopped and beamed up at the imposing stone block building that loomed before them. It was shaped like a squat cylinder, with pillars running all around its circumference and a set of enormous, iron-framed doors set into the deep portico.

“Ah, I see young Mr. Potter has joined us,” Franklyn said, noticing James and smiling indulgently. “You’ll come inside with us, of course, although you might find it a wee bit chilly. The Archive requires strict temperature control in order to preserve its more delicate artifacts. Shall we?” He gestured up the broad stairway, and followed as the group climbed into the building’s shadow.

“How is school treating you so far, James?” Merlin asked as they ascended the stairs.

“Good, mostly,” James replied.

“I have something to give you before my departure tomorrow evening,” Merlin announced somewhat abruptly, keeping his voice low. “I suspect it will ease your adjustment to your new environs. Come and find me tomorrow before sunset.”

James peered up at the big wizard curiously and nodded.

Franklyn approached a smaller door set into the base of one of the enormous iron-barred doors and waved his wand at it. There was a click and the door swung slowly open of its own accord.

“Of course, the main research area is always open to all students and faculty,” Franklyn announced, leading the others through the dark doorway. “One must only wave their wand before the door to identify themselves. Once inside, the entire history of the school, and, alas, the United States itself, can be illuminated and studied in great detail. If, that is, one is able to produce the proper artifact. The Archive can be rather daunting to the uninitiated.”

After a short dark hallway, James found himself led into a round room with blank stone walls. The vaulted ceiling was studded with dozens of tiny windows, fogged with age, reducing the light of the room to a dull, milky glow, virtually shadowless. Franklyn’s voice echoed as he moved into the light, toward the room’s only dominant feature.

“This is the brain of the Archive,” he said, touching the stone pedestal that stood in the center of the room. “The Disrecorder. With its help, we may revisit any of the events represented by the Archive’s prodigious collection of artifacts. Quite simple, really, and elegantly effective.”

“The Disrecorder,” Denniston Dolohov said, as if tasting the word. “Something that unravels a recording of some kind? Might I inquire how it works?”

“You very well might,” Franklyn answered with a smile. “Many have. Interestingly enough, no one truly knows. The Disrecorder is one of the Archive’s two fantastical ancient relics that have come to us through the mists of the ages, with origins wholly unknown. Theodore Jackson, who most of you have already met, has studied the phenomenon at length and has developed his own theories, although I admit that my understanding of them is imperfect at best. To be honest, I was hoping that *you* might be able to provide some insight into the mystery, Headmaster Ambrosius.”

James glanced at Franklyn, and then at Merlin, who stood off to the side, his arms folded over his chest. It made sense that Merlin might, in fact, know something about the ancient object when one remembered that Merlin himself was, technically, over a millennium old.

“I remember talk of such things in the time from which I have come,” Merlin admitted. “Deruwid Magic, it was called, and I regret to say that it was practiced only by the most secret and bent of magical societies. Ugly and vile in their dark hearts, bloodthirsty to the core, and yet powerful. The Deruwid practitioners posited that everything—from sound waves, to exhaled breaths, to magical afterglow—made tiny infinitesimal marks on the surface of the earth, a sort of code, waiting to be deciphered. In my early days, I visited these dark ones, and observed them. At that time, they sought the means to observe and read these marks—these *recordings*, as they viewed them,” Merlin said, nodding toward Harry. “For they believed that if all of history could be read and distilled, then all futures could be perfectly predicted. These were wizards who desired power above

all else, and they firmly believed in one thing: that he who controls the future controls all of the earth and those within it. I have learned, in fact, that this is an idea that has its adherents still today.”

James realized that Merlin was staring rather pointedly at Franklyn. Franklyn noticed it as well.

“Indeed,” he said a little weakly. “As with all wicked ideas, they crop up in every age, only by different names. Fortunately, the idea you speak of has fallen from favour and been disproven in this age just as effectively as it was in the age of your Deruwids.”

“Out of favour it may be,” Merlin said slowly. “But disproven?”

“I think I’ve heard of this,” Harry commented, frowning slightly. “It’s known as the Wizarding Grand Unification Theory, yes? Popular a century or so ago, if I am not mistaken.”

“Yes, yes,” Franklyn agreed with a wave of his hand. “Along with phrenology, vivisection, and the Fountain of Pleasing Breath. And all equally debunked in the modern era. But I thank you for your, er, enlightenment, Headmaster.”

“How, might I ask,” Denniston Dolohov said, putting on his spectacles, “was this theory debunked?”

“Ah,” Franklyn answered more comfortably. “It’s quite obvious, really. The Disrecorder, if indeed it is a relic from the age of the Deruwids, fails quite soundly when presented with any average object. Observe.”

With that, Franklyn dug in one of his vest pockets and produced two coins, which he held up for those watching.

“This coin here,” he announced, regarding the first small golden shape in his fingers, “is a standard American Drummel, or half-note. Worth a little less than five Knuts by your measure. I will now place it into the bowl of the Disrecorder. Perhaps we will learn in whose pockets it rode before it found its way into mine, yes?”

With a clink, Franklyn dropped the coin into the concave top of the stone pedestal. James watched with interest. There was silence for several seconds as everyone waited.

“Hmm,” Franklyn frowned. “Nothing. And this is to be expected. You see, the Disrecorder only deciphers the imprints of an artifact that has been especially charmed to receive the input of its surroundings. Which bring us, as it were, to Exhibit B.”

Franklyn pocketed the half-note and held up another, decidedly larger coin. It glittered faintly silver despite a layer of dark tarnish.

“*This* coin, worth a standard note, or Jack, you may be interested to know, was carried in the pocket of Sir Percival Pepperpock, one of the original founders of this school, upon the date of its groundbreaking. The coin was especially charmed on that day, thus preserving the details of the event for us in perpetuity. Observe.”

Franklyn dropped the coin onto the bowl of the Disrecorder.

“Do you have the shovel?” a voice asked loudly in James’ ear. He spun around and found himself staring up into the face of a large, very fat man wearing a vest and a short cloak with a high collar. He was smiling and red-faced, his forehead beaded with sweat. A man next to him handed him a small spade. James glanced around, wide-eyed. The walls and ceiling of the Archive chamber were still visible, but only faintly. Harry, Denniston Dolohov, Merlin, and Franklyn appeared to be standing in a grassy field, glowing with sunshine and dotted with butterflies. Other figures stood in a haphazard line, beaming and squinting in the sunlight. Some of the figures, James was interested to see, were dwarves. With their knobby heads, sausage-like bodies, and vaguely porcine faces, James thought that each one looked a bit like a cross between a goblin and a pot-bellied pig. Wind blew, and James smelled the fresh scent of wild, wooded spring.

A gritty, scooping sound came from behind James and he turned again, stepping aside as the fat wizard, Sir Pepperpock himself, tossed the first shovelful of earth aside, nearly onto James’ shoes.

“Here, we shall erect our school,” Pepperpock proclaimed happily. “And here we shall teach the dual duties of magical mastery and human respect, thus to ensure that said mastery is never used for selfish aims, but always for the good of all. Here, we shall grow our school, and from it we shall grow generations of witches and wizards who will be the shining lights of the magical world. We shall call them our children, and we shall call our school... Alma Aleron, the Mother Eagle!”

The line of observing witches and wizards applauded heartily. The dwarves applauded too, but with slightly less fervor.

“They cannot see us, of course,” Franklyn called over the sound of the applause, “but it is rather hard to remember so with a recording as well-maintained as this. The artifact has held up remarkably well, being in the guise of a coin. Not all artifacts are quite as sturdy, unfortunately, but we do what we can to maintain them as well as possible.”

James turned back to the Chancellor in time to see him scoop the coin from the bowl of the Disrecorder. The grassy hilltop and the happy centuries-old witches and wizards vanished instantly.

“So,” Franklyn said proudly, pocketing the coin, “simple as can be. Any event can be recorded for future witness and study merely by converting any object at hand into a magical receiver. The object then becomes one of our many artifacts and goes into the Archive’s collection.”

“Just like Ted’s new Extendable Ears,” James said, thinking of the peppermint that Ted had enchanted to act as a receiver for the Ears. “Er, sort of.”

“An apt analogy, I would say,” Merlin nodded, smiling crookedly.

“Marvelous!” Dolohov proclaimed happily. “And where is this collection of artifacts?”

“Why right here, of course,” Franklyn answered, turning and walking across the empty room. “The chamber of the Disrecorder is only the top level of the Archive. The bulk of the space is used for the artifact library. Just through this door in the back.”

Franklyn produced a tiny golden key, which he socked into a keyhole in a nondescript door. Rather than turning the key, he touched it with his wand. The key glowed brightly for a moment,

and then turned on its own. The door cracked open and a breath of cool air escaped, sighing mysteriously. Franklyn gripped the handle and heaved the door open.

James followed his father into the space beyond and shivered. It was, indeed, quite cold. The temperature, however, was forgotten immediately as James got his first glimpse of the space. It was monstrous, far larger than the exterior of the Archive could account for. Tall wooden shelves ranged around the space along curved walls that met in the dim distance, some three hundred feet across a vast, deep chasm. Thousands of artifacts rested on the shelves, in the form of books, jars, dishes, shoes, spectacles, wands, globes, stuffed animals, tools, hats, and innumerable other objects. Larger shelves held chairs, beds, even a very old car that James recognized as a Ford Model T. Every object bore a tiny white tag, apparently cataloging the contents of the event recorded within it.

Slowly, the group walked toward a low brass railing that ran around the huge opening in the floor. As James neared it, he saw that a stairway led down into the space, curving along the inside of the chasm. The stairs appeared to lead to another, lower floor, equally filled with shelves of artifacts. When James finally reached the railing and peered down, he saw that there were more floors below that, descending into the bowels of the earth in a dizzying spiral. On the opposite side of the chasm, an ornate, brass-framed elevator hung, its shaft descending deep into the floors below.

“There must be millions of artifacts here,” Harry breathed. “It’s overwhelming.”

Franklyn nodded. “Quite so. We have a staff of students whose sole job is maintaining the catalog, updating and cleaning the artifacts as needed. Our Archival custodian, Mr. Hadley Henredon, lives here year round, guarding the artifacts and overseeing their preservation.”

“What, Chancellor, is that object at the very bottom?” Merlin asked, leaning slightly over the railing with his eyes narrowed.

“Ah, that,” Franklyn nodded. He peered over the railing himself, and James followed suit. In the darkness at the base of the chasm, a large object flashed and glimmered with purple light. It appeared to be spinning, but in a complicated, unpredictable fashion, as if it was made out of a dozen golden leaves and prisms, all revolving independently around some blindingly bright core.

“If the Disrecorder can be called the brain of the Archive,” Franklyn said soberly, “then that down there... is its heart and soul.”

Dolohov adjusted his spectacles and blinked down at the distant gold and purple blur. “Is it another artifact?”

“Not exactly,” Franklyn answered. “It is, in fact, a very ancient form of distinctly American magic. None of us knows how it works or even *why* it works. We only know what it does and that it is dreadfully, devastatingly important.”

“American magic,” Harry said, glancing aside at the Chancellor. “It can’t be all that old then, can it?”

“You misunderstand me,” Franklyn said gravely. “America is indeed an old, old land. Much older than the government that now occupies it. It was here before the first settlers arrived at Plymouth Rock. It was here when this land’s original inhabitants roamed the prairies and

woodlands, living in teepees and hunting the buffalo that roamed in herds many miles long. America is a strange and ancient place although it was not always known by that name. We call it the great melting pot, but its attractions have been evident since long before our arrival here.

“Many other peoples and cultures visited this land in the ages of its existence, many of them magical, many of them long forgotten in the eons since. That object down there, the one encased in our best magical protections and guardian charms... was left by one of those visiting magical peoples. Our best guesses tell us that it was the ancient Persians or Babylonians, who were among the first magical communities to ply the oceans. Perhaps they left it here, on the prairies of this wide open land, quite by accident. Then again, perhaps they abandoned it deliberately, either because they didn’t need it anymore or, more likely, because they feared it, feared the dangers of this thing that their vast magical arts had wrought. We discovered it, and preserve it, but we did not create it. And we most certainly do not control it.”

“Every magical society has its mysterious treasures,” Harry commented. “I’ve been inside the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic, so I’ve seen many of our own. This object of yours I think I may have heard of, although I understand that its existence is kept secret from the general public. Is this so?”

“For their good, as well as its own,” Franklyn nodded.

“So what is it?” Merlin asked once more. James looked up at him, and saw the purple flash of the object even this far up playing on the Headmaster’s stern features.

“It is the ultimate record of all things,” Franklyn said simply. “It is our history, and by that, I do not mean the history of Alma Aleron or the city of Philadelphia or even the entire United States. It is a record of all things that have ever been in this universe, from the very dawn of time. It is History, recorded in its entirety exactly as it happens, with magic so ancient and delicate that none dare to touch it. Only a very few of us have ever seen it with our naked eyes, and that only happens once a century, when we check it just to make sure it is still working.”

Dolohov cleared his throat. In a small voice, he asked, “What does it look like?”

Franklyn peered down at the flickering glow and smiled slightly. He shook his head slowly as he said, “Friends, I don’t think you’d believe me if I told you. It is so simple, so basic, that you would find it silly. And yet I think it is anything but.”

“So what happens,” Harry asked seriously, “if it stops working?”

“Why, none of us knows for sure, my dear Mr. Potter,” Franklyn replied, looking slightly startled. “But I have the strongest suspicion that life—that is, everything we know and ever will know, the totality of existence—is inextricably connected to the object stored in the bowels of this very Archive. I think that if *it* stopped working... so would everything else.”

Merlin frowned doubtfully. “I have known my share of very powerful magical objects,” he said in a low voice. “And they all make their marks on the fabric of existence. I have never heard tell of a single magical object that bears the fabric of existence within itself. Are you quite sure of your theories about this object, Chancellor?”

“Alas,” Franklyn answered, chuckling wearily. “No. We know very little, in fact. Theories are as myriad as they are improvable. We only know what the object does. We do not know why, or how, or, in fact, what would happen if it were to stop.”

“In that case,” Merlin said, smiling at the Chancellor, “your prudence is the most obvious and respectable choice. I am glad to know that such mysterious magic is in the hands of those so very aware of its potential gravity. What do you call it?”

Franklyn sighed and looked back down, through the depths of the artifact laden floors, to the flashing purple and gold glow far below.

With a relatively anticlimactic sniff, he answered, “We call it the Vault of Destinies.”



After dinner that evening, James, Zane, and Ralph ran back to the common dorm, cutting across the lawns and weaving through the shadows of the huge elms and chestnuts. Inside, they stripped off their blazers and stowed them in the top floor room that still housed the boys' trunks. When they finally made their way back downstairs and out the rear door of the common dorm, the lowering sun had painted the sky a fierce tangerine, fading to navy blue at its zenith.

“There,” Zane nodded, pointing.

The boys angled toward a line of battered metal trash cans ranged along the back wall. A drift of elm leaves lay like snow around the trash cans, carpeting their lids, but the yellow ‘Z’ on the can in the middle was immediately visible. James drew a breath, held it, and then lifted the lid from the marked can.

“What is it?” Ralph frowned, peering in.

“Oh man,” Zane grinned. “Oh buddy. You got the granddaddy of all pledge dares. Either Warrington thinks you two are bonafide Zombies or he hates your guts.”

James reached into the can and retrieved a handful of cloth. It was thick, comprised of black and yellow fabrics all sewn together in a neat pattern. There seemed to be acres of it.

“It’s a flag,” Ralph said, grabbing a handful and helping James pull it out of the can.

“It’s the Hermes House flag,” Zane said reverently. “See? It’s got the Zombie crest on it, the yellow and black shield bearing the skull with crossed out eyes. Do you know what this means?”

James looked from the enormous flag in his hands to Ralph to Zane. He shook his head, not particularly liking where this was going.

“It’s an old dare, but one of the most revered. The legendary flag switch. I hear that it hasn’t been done by any house in years. That means the school administration’s probably going to be on the lookout for it. There may be boundary charms, guard hexes, even lookouts. Oh man, it’s going to be such a blast! I can’t believe I’m not allowed to come along!”

James wanted to throttle the blonde boy, but his hands were too full of flag. “What is it, you big dope? Tell us, already!”

Zane grinned and helped grab the rest of the flag out of the trash can. He wadded the mass of fabric, stuffed it into Ralph and James’ arms, and then led them around the building. When they stood in front, overlooking the fountain with the gargoyle birdbath, he put an arm around James’ shoulder. With his free hand he pointed across campus. “See that? Up there over the trees, on top of Administration Hall?”

“What?” Ralph asked, squinting in the twilight. “The clock tower?”

“Higher,” Zane prodded, grinning even wider.

James pushed up on tiptoes to see over the trees. “Er, the belfry?”

“Higher,” Zane encouraged.

James looked higher. His eyes widened and he began to shake his head slowly. “No. No way.”

“The flag?” Ralph said, turning to look at Zane. “Way up on the top? That’s got to be two hundred feet up! You can’t be serious!”

“Two hundred and thirty-three at the point. Don’t worry,” Zane soothed, but his eager grin had quite the opposite effect. “There’s a fire escape on the back of the Hall that takes you all the way to the bell tower. From there, there’s a spiral staircase up to the belfry and a ladder up to the belfry roof. Piece of cake! Except for the bats, of course, but they’re no match for a committed Zombie.”

“You want us to switch this flag,” James said, hefting the mound of thick fabric in his arms, “with that flag way up there?”

“Well, switching the flags is only the first half of the challenge. That flag up there is the university’s original stars and stripes, ‘Old Betsy’. You can’t just hide her under your bed in the

common dorm or anything, unless you want a posse from Werewolf House to hunt you down and clobber you ten ways from Sunday. You have to run Old Betsy up the Zombie House flagpole. Later tomorrow afternoon, we'll turn Old Betsy back in at the Administration Hall and get an honorary punishment. You'll probably just get a day's suspension."

"Wait," Ralph said, frowning. "If we succeed in this dare, we get in trouble with the school?"

"You can't think of it that way," Zane said, clapping Ralph on the shoulder. "It's a pledge dare. A day's suspension is like a badge of honor. Think of it as a paid vacation."

James sighed. "All right then. We'll do it. But after this, it's all over, right? We'll be Zombies, officially?"

"You pull this off," Zane said heartily, "and we may make you both House Presidents for a day."

James nodded grimly. A minute later, the three carried the Zombie flag up to the dorm room and hid it in the closet. Chasing each other, they crossed the campus again, heading for the theater and Professor Longbottom's assembly.

Here closes chapter eight. 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 what's happened thus far.

In tomorrow's BIG chapter: The American Progressive Element enters the debate! James and Ralph take part in the Great Flag Switch Escapade and are introduced to their new House! And a surprising appearance of Petra shakes James' confidence in her. See you tomorrow at noon, CST!