



9. THE ARCHIVE ATTACK

“James!” his mum cried when she met him in front of the campus theater. “Oh, you look so handsome in your uniform. Just look at you!”

“Mum!” James hissed, pushing her hand away as she attempted to mat down his hair. “Quit it! You’re embarrassing me in front of the Zombies!”

“Oh yes, your new house. That reminds me, have you seen Albus?” she asked, peering around the crowd that milled near the theater entrance.

“Just look for the blokes with the dark gray uniforms and the burgundy ties,” James answered. “Albus will probably be carrying them on his shoulders.”

“So how is the sorting tradition coming along, then?” Denniston Dolohov asked, smiling and nodding proudly at his son.

“Ask us again tomorrow morning,” Ralph sighed.

Zane beamed. “They’re doing great, everybody. Not as well as I did, of course, but that’s a pretty high bar to reach. Tomorrow, they’ll be Zombies all official-like. You wait and see.”

James saw the curious look in his mother’s eye and changed the subject as quickly as he could. “Where’s Dad and Headmaster Merlin anyway?”

“They’re both up front with Neville,” Ginny sighed as they pushed through the theater doors, entering the main lobby. “He’s a bit nervous, after all. They’re giving him a spot of moral support.”

“Hi Petra!” Zane called, waving. James turned around and saw her entering behind them, smiling warmly. The three boys drifted toward her.

“Where’s Izzy?” Ralph asked, peering around.

“She’s staying with Molly and Lily tonight. I hear that the assembly might run rather long, so Audrey’s watching both of them at the flat downtown. How are you both settling in?”

“Fine,” James answered. “It’s way different here, but not so different that it doesn’t make its own weird sense.”

“They have *six* houses,” Ralph said, shaking his head. “Crazy, if you ask me. What about you, Petra?”

“I spent most of the day applying for jobs here on campus,” Petra sighed wearily. “I don’t need much money, after all. Even teacher’s assistants get free room and board, and can even take graduate level classes for no charge. Izzy can stay here with me and go to the little faculty grade school on campus. I might go for my T.O.A.D. certification and become a professor myself. *If* I can get in somewhere, that is.”

“Who wouldn’t hire you?” James asked as the four made their way into the seating area. “You’re a genius no matter how you look at it! Why, they’d be a bunch of sodding blockheads not to see that.” He stopped himself and reddened, suddenly fearing that he might be making his point a little too enthusiastically.

“Thanks James,” Petra replied. “Here’s hoping. I’ll probably know by the end of the week. The truth is I’m feeling pretty confident. The Headmaster put in a good word for me with some of the department heads.”

“He did?” James asked, wide-eyed.

“You seem surprised,” Petra said, looking at him a bit quizzically.

“Well,” James said, looking away, “no. Er, of course not. I mean, Merlin, he’s got a lot of pull, doesn’t he?”

Petra shrugged. “He’s Merlinus Ambrosius.”

The four made their way into a row near the front, squeezing past a gaggle of Pixie House girls in pink sweaters, who peered narrowly up at James and Ralph’s plain black ties.

“Pledges,” one of the girls muttered. “They should have their own seating section in the back.”

“Oh wait,” another of the girls said, raising a hand to her lips in mock surprise, “they do!”

“We know the professor,” James said loudly. “The one who’s giving the speech? That bloke? Yeah, we came with him.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed,” the first girl responded. “Your accent didn’t give you away at *all*.”

Ralph peered sideways at the girls as he sat down. “*We* don’t have accents,” he muttered. “*They* do. Daft Americans.”

“Shh,” Petra shushed, smiling. “We don’t want to make an international scene.”

“There’s Lucy,” James said, turning around in his seat. “And Albus. They’re sitting with Mum and Uncle Percy and Mr. Dolohov, a few rows back.”

“So how’s that whole Dolohov thing working out for you anyway, Ralph?” Zane asked, nudging the larger boy. “I see you’ve stuck with the Deedle. Is that causing you any grief?”

Ralph shrugged. “I like the Deedle. I mean, I know it’s not quite as dashing-sounding as Dolohov, but I just can’t do it. I mean, you know the history of that family. I have a hard enough time living it down without taking the name.”

“Yeah,” Zane nodded. “I heard about what happened with you and Ted last year. I’m guessing he got most of that out of his system though.”

“At least if he didn’t,” James added thoughtfully, “there’s a whole ocean between him and Ralph now. And I hear werewolves don’t much like the water.”

“He’s not a true werewolf,” Ralph said, shaking his head. “He’s a Metamorphmagus with certain wolfish tendencies, but still, yeah, I’m not too upset about having an ocean between us.”

Zane sighed and settled back into his seat. “I bet trying to live with two names is tough, either way. I don’t envy you, Ralphinator. Hey, that makes *three* names you’ve got!”

“You’re the only person that calls me *that* one,” Ralph said, rolling his eyes.

Next to James, Petra remained silent. Ralph, James remembered, was not the only person living with two names. Petra had changed her own name in the wake of the ordeal at her grandfather’s farm, deciding to call herself, simply, Morgan. She hadn’t insisted that everyone change how they refer to her, but James had a sneaky feeling that in her heart, she couldn’t shake her new name any more than Ralph could shake the name Dolohov. James didn’t know what it all meant, but it worried him a little.

It was almost like Petra had two different personalities. One was the Petra that he had known for the past couple of years, the happy girl and bright student. The other, however, Morgan, did eerily powerful magic without the aid of a wand and very well might have killed someone. James couldn’t help wondering if, just perhaps, those two sides of Petra’s personality were at war with each other. More importantly, which side, if any, was most influenced by that last haunting shred of Voldemort’s lost soul? And how might it influence Petra’s internal struggle?

James’ worried thoughts were interrupted at that point as a figure emerged onto the brightly lit stage before them. The house lights went dim all around and the crowd fell gradually silent.

“Ladies and gentleman, students, faculty, and visiting friends from the magical community,” the man said, smiling. He was tall and lean, with shiny black hair framing his ruddy face. “Welcome. My name is Professor John Sanuye, and I am the Head of the Flora Department here at Alma Aleron. I am pleased to say that we have procured one of the world’s foremost experts on magical botany, a man whose fame precedes him, even among those who have not read his very interesting treatise on the thousand and one uses of common marsh ferns and mosses. Please welcome for tonight’s discussion Mr. Neville Longbottom.”

Sanuye applauded and beamed as Neville stood from his seat in the front row. Before climbing the stairs to the podium, he turned and smiled sheepishly back at the crowd. It was not a large theater, but James was quite surprised to see that it was very full, with students crammed into the back on folding chairs, and even standing in the entryway. They applauded, but there were very few smiles in the room.

Neville climbed the stairs and produced a small stack of notes from the pocket of his robes. He cleared his throat and peered out over the podium, smiling nervously. James felt a pang of discomfort for the professor. Neville was clearly terrified of speaking before such a large audience.

“Ahem,” he said, clearing his throat again. “Thank you all for coming. I am, er, quite honored and, frankly, surprised by the turnout. In the country from which I come, herbology is not a subject that commands such, er, *enthusiastic* adherents.”

A murmur of laughter rippled over the room, taking Neville by surprise. He blinked and smiled before going on. “I’ve, er, come tonight prepared to speak on some of the newer avenues of magical botanical research, which are, er, advancing our understanding of such studies as potion-making, medicine, wand-creation, and even wizarding philosophy and ethics.”

Neville grew more confident as he spoke and James found himself growing quickly bored. As much as he liked Professor Longbottom, he always found his classes exceedingly, almost painfully dull. Tonight’s speech was no different except for the fact that James didn’t need to pay attention for the sake of a grade. His thoughts began to wander, as did his eye. The rest of the audience watched Neville with varying degrees of alert interest, polite boredom, and, in a few cases, frowning concentration. In the front row, James was surprised to see his dad leaning aside and whispering to a man that James didn’t know. The man smiled as Harry whispered to him, and then laughed silently, his eyes twinkling. Strangely enough, the two seemed to be very familiar with each other, as if they were long lost friends. James made a mental note to ask his father about the man later.

Eventually, Neville produced a series of photographs, which he temporarily enlarged with *Engorgio* spells. The photographs were magical of course, but since they were mostly of plants, they didn’t move. The only interesting one was of a strange tree with long tentacle-like branches tipped with snapping jaws, rather like large Venus Flytraps. The tree, which Neville called a Moroccan Fanged Vipertwhip, writhed and snapped its many jaws in the photo, commanding a gasp from some of the observers in the front rows. Near the end of the speech, Neville produced a small plant of his own, withdrawing it from his robes like a long green snake. The root-ball was tiny, about the size of a walnut, clutching a neat spoonful of earth. Neville set the plant onto the end of the podium, where it slowly righted itself and reached toward the lights overhead.

“This, ladies and gentlemen, is my crowning achievement,” Neville said proudly. “The mythical and elusive Bamboozle tree. According to legend, it is able to adopt the appearance and even the alchemical characteristics of virtually any plant to which it is exposed, disguising itself in avoidance of being weeded out. Allow me to illustrate.”

Neville used his wand to levitate one of his many photos, and then gave it a flick, enlarging it.

“Devil’s Snare,” he said, nodding toward the photo. There was a slight rustling on the podium as the Bamboozle shifted. Its roots spread out and grew thick and brown while its few leaves multiplied and turned into snaking vines. Within moments, the Bamboozle had transfigured itself into the unmistakable shape of a small Devil’s Snare, much like the one in the enlarged photograph. The crowd murmured with interest.

“Spynuswort,” Neville said proudly, flicking his wand again and producing another photograph, this one showing a tall, thin plant with reddish patterned leaves. The Bamboozle changed again. Its vines curled into balls and then budded leaves, perfectly replicating those shown in the photo.

“Larcenous Ligulous,” Neville smiled, changing the photo once more. Now, the Bamboozle flattened and spread out, covering the top of the podium with writhing green creepers. The crowd muttered and stirred all around.

“And lest we forget,” Neville said, removing a ring from his finger and holding it up to the light, “the most remarkable characteristic of the Bamboozle: its ability to emulate any chosen plant’s characteristic tendencies and magical make-up. This, more than anything, is what makes it so potentially invaluable to the wizarding world.”

The Bamboozle sensed the glitter of Neville’s upheld ring. Slowly, it lifted a trio of creepers, which rose toward the ring, as if sniffing at it. They curled around it hungrily and pried it from Neville’s hand, just as a Larcenous Ligulous plant would. The audience laughed and applauded lightly.

“If I were to snip a root sample from the Bamboozle in its current state and submit it to any herbological laboratory, it would take much testing to prove that it was not, in fact, a true Larcenous Ligulous. If we are able to successfully breed and propagate the Bamboozle, it may significantly improve the availability of some of the wizarding world’s rarest and most essential botanical resources, and even allow us to recreate many that have ceased to exist entirely.”

The crowd responded again, led by the very enthusiastic applause of Professor Sanuye in the front row. Harry clapped as well and whistled loudly. The man next to him joined in, cupping his hands to his mouth. “Go Neville!” he called, nodding encouragement.

“And that pretty much concludes my presentation,” Neville said, smiling with obvious relief. He flicked his wand once more, shrinking the photos back to their normal size and catching them as they dropped out of the air. On the podium, the Bamboozle tree began to slowly revert to its original state. “Professor Sanuye has suggested that we open the floor to any comments or questions from the audience, which I am happy to do. So, does anyone have anything they’d like to ask about?”

James looked around, surprised to see a raft of hands suddenly shoot up all around. Neville seemed surprised as well. He blinked and took a half step back from the podium. With a shrug and a smile, he pointed to a hand in the front row. “You then. Speak up for us all to hear.”

“Greetings, Professor,” one of the Pixie students said, standing up and smiling. “Thank you for coming to speak to us. My question has less to do with herbology than it does with history, if you’ll indulge me.”

Neville blinked again. James glanced at the Pixie student. She was older, quite possibly one of the college students. She met Neville’s gaze openly, still smiling, and James couldn’t help thinking that it was an uncomfortably familiar expression. It was, in fact, the same sort of expression Tabitha Corsica had so often worn when she was about to say something infuriatingly confrontational.

“History isn’t really my area of expertise,” Neville said slowly, but the girl spoke up before he could continue.

“I recognize that herbology is your passion, which means you obviously have a great love for all growing things. I wonder if that love extends to the animal kingdom as well? I understand that you are in the habit of beheading snakes. Would you care to elaborate?”

There was a sort of collective low whistle from the crowd, and then a ripple of derisive laughter. James glanced around with sudden anger and dismay, and then looked back up at the podium. Neville’s face had gone red, but his mouth had tightened into a hard line.

“Next question,” he stated flatly, raising his gaze over the crowd. Hands shot into the air again.

“Yes, Professor,” another student asked from the back. James turned around and saw that it was a member of Igor House, wearing the characteristic acid green tie. His face was round and waxy in the lamplight near the doors. “I’m sorry, my question isn’t really flora-related either. Did you know, when you rallied your classmates against the revolutionaries of your time, that you were siding with the existing totalitarian regime or were you just duped by the propaganda of the day into thinking that you were on the side of right?”

Neville opened his mouth in shock as the crowd babbled noisily, nodding in agreement and shouting for him to answer. James looked around again, meeting Zane and Ralph’s eyes. It was like the first Hogwarts all-school debate again, only worse, because the entire crowd seemed to be on the same side. Now James understood why the lecture had been so well-attended. Neville, after all, was nearly as famous as Harry Potter, and not just for his textbooks on herbology.

“I was afraid something like this would happen,” Zane said, leaning toward James. “Like I told you, the Progressive Element types are all over the place here. There are even some in the faculty.”

Ralph looked around uneasily. “Won’t the professors put a stop to it?”

“That’s not really the way things work around here,” Zane replied. “Neville’s expected to answer the questions, no matter what. I wouldn’t be surprised if this wasn’t part of why he was asked to speak.”

“If that’s true, it’s beastly,” Petra said with low conviction.

At the podium, Neville stood stoically, his brow lowered. He no longer seemed nervous. He seemed, if anything, quietly angry. He collected the Bamboozle again and deposited it carefully into a pocket of his robes.

“Are there any questions related to the subject that I was invited here to speak upon?” he asked loudly, overruling the babbling audience.

“Answer the question!” a voice behind James hollered. Others joined in, turning the phrase into a chant.

Neville glanced down toward the front row. James leaned forward and saw his dad nod slightly up at Neville. To James’ amazement, Harry Potter seemed to be smiling with something like weary resignation. On Harry’s left, Merlin’s expression was calm and inscrutable, his arms folded almost lazily across his chest. Professor Sanuye shrugged up at Neville and shook his head regretfully. He didn’t appear to like what was happening, but neither did he seem prepared to put a stop to it.

“You lot seem to be suffering under some rather unfortunate misapprehensions about history,” Neville finally said, holding his wand to his throat and amplifying his voice. The raucous crowd quieted, but not completely. Neville went on, lowering his wand again. “Now, if you insist upon asking questions unrelated to my subject of expertise, I shall apparently have to answer them, lest I leave you with the impression that I am unable to do so. But you will ask your questions with respect, and not use the opportunity to merely quote popular propaganda for the amusement of your fellows. Is anyone willing to abide by these stipulations?”

Less hands went up now. Neville frowned and nodded at a student near James, who stood up.

“Professor,” the young man said, and James saw that he was a college-level student and a member of Vampire House, “as a scholar, surely you’d agree that your work with flora is intended for the benefit of all mankind. Is that true?”

Neville narrowed his eyes slightly. “I live in the hope that such is the case, young man.”

“Then why, sir, do you and others like you insist on hoarding your discoveries for the magical community, refusing even to consider sharing them with the Muggle world?”

The crowd erupted again, shouting scornfully, many climbing to their feet.

“Questions... are... permitted!” a voice bellowed from the front row, and James was relieved to see that it was Professor Sanuye, his eyes dark and severe. The crowd quieted again almost instantly and the professor went on in a measured voice. “But disrespect is *not*. You have heard the terms of our esteemed guest and they are quite reasonable. It is the policy of this school to welcome discourse, but not discord. Allow Professor Longbottom to answer your questions or do not ask them. Understood?”

The crowd muttered to itself, obviously agitated, but subdued for the moment. On the stage, Neville cleared his throat again.

“A good question, my friend,” he said slowly, raising his eyebrows. “One that any thinking witch and wizard should ask themselves. The answer, however, is equally important. Granted, we in

the magical community could offer many advancements and medicines to the Muggle world. The fact of the matter is that we do so even now. Your own Chancellor has had a hand in the groundbreaking Inter-Magical Knowledge Exchange Act, which allows inertly magical lifesaving discoveries to be shared with the Muggle world secretly, but effectively. There are charities and coalitions who have been granted special privilege to act secretly in the Muggle world, performing acts of magical intervention in deserving situations. I suspect that you are aware of these things, however, so I can only assume that what you truly mean by your question is this: why do we not simply throw the doors of the magical world wide open to the Muggle community, revealing ourselves fully and completely? Is this so?"

The young man shuffled his feet slightly and glanced around at the rest of the audience. "Um. Yes, I think that is exactly right. The prejudiced policies of magical governments against the Muggle world should be overthrown. Total disclosure is the only option that will result in real freedom for all of humanity..."

"Yes, yes," Neville nodded. "I've seen the posters as well. Let us assume that we do exactly as you propose. The magical world comes out of hiding and reveals itself completely to the Muggle world. What do you expect will happen?"

"Well," the young man mumbled, looking around again, apparently wishing someone else would come to his aid. The rest of the audience merely watched with bright-eyed interest. "Well, then there would be equality. We could help the Muggles. We could share everything we know with them, and help them in lots of ways. I mean, we're witches and wizards. We've got magic on our side."

"Ahh!" Neville said, leaning forward on the podium. "We could help them indeed. But what if they didn't *wish* to be helped? What if certain members of the magical community desired to get involved in Muggle affairs, such as business, medicine, even government, and the Muggles didn't wish them to?"

"Then we'd help them to understand that we just want to help them!" the student replied, rallying. "They wouldn't know what was best for them, after all."

Neville nodded. "So we'd help them against their will?"

"If we had to," the young man answered, raising his chin.

"Indeed," Neville concurred. "Many would do exactly that. Certain witches and wizards would inculcate themselves into the Muggle ruling class, all under the guise of helping them. Some of us—not you, of course, my friend, but *some*—would be happy to resort to force. They'd use whatever magic helped them in the cause, even the Imperius Curse. Others, however, would be less... scrupulous. Believe it or not, my friends, there are witches and wizards among us who might actually wish to rule the Muggles merely for the sake of power. Such people are kept in check now by the existence of the international laws of secrecy. But what will you do with these witches and wizards if those laws are abolished? Will you protect the Muggles from them? How? What will keep wicked witches and wizards from using whatever means they wish to achieve power over the Muggles?"

The young man seemed to know that he was losing the moral high ground. He shuffled his feet some more and refused to look directly at Neville. “That’s just scaremongering. That’s what you people always do.”

“Scaring people with fictitious threats is scaremongering,” Neville said kindly. “Warning people about threats that are quite real—threats that history teaches us are very nearly a certainty given the right conditions—is an act of kindness and compassion. The history of Muggle-magical interaction is rife with conflict. Both sides are equally guilty, admittedly, but the reality remains the same. We stay in hiding, quite simply, because the good that could come from our incorporation into the Muggle world is decidedly less than the evil that would inevitably result. In a perfect world, my friend, your theories would be quite honorable. Alas, this is not a perfect world.”

“Excuses and lies!” the student cried out suddenly, and the crowd stirred around him, murmuring agreement. “You hate the Muggles, so you wish to keep them ignorant of us, and all we could do for them. There *aren’t* any supreme evil witches and wizards bent on taking over the world. That’s a lie that you people have made up just to keep the rest of the magical world in line. The Muggles would welcome us, and you know it. And even if they didn’t...” The young man faltered suddenly, realizing what he was about to say.

Neville didn’t blink, but stared at the man solemnly, gripping the podium before him. “Even if they didn’t...” he said, finishing the student’s thought, “we’d have magic on our side. Right?”

The young man sat down suddenly and the crowd babbled again, growing noisy and tense. Professor Sanuye climbed to the stage and moved alongside Neville. “That will conclude tonight’s lecture,” he called sternly. “Students, please make your way back to your dormitories, thank you. It is rather late, and at least some of you have class with me in the morning. I will frown upon any absences due to your staying out too late the night before. Good evening, and thank you for coming.” At that point, Sanuye turned to Neville, reaching to shake his hand. The two talked, their heads close together.

“What a complete load of yax fodder,” a girl behind James muttered angrily. “But what do you expect?”

“Come on,” Zane sighed, shaking his head. “The sooner we get out of here, the better. Let’s go grab a soda at the Kite and Key.”

James followed Zane and Ralph out of the crowded theater, glancing back toward the stage. His father stood in front, flanked by Merlin and Denniston Dolohov, who was laughing animatedly. None of them seemed the slightest bit perturbed by the events of the night and James could guess why. Most of them had been dealing with the allegations of the Progressive Element for years, both subtly, through articles in *the Daily Prophet*, and overtly, such as the demonstration that had occurred at Hogwarts during James’ first year. They had all developed rather thick skins about such things. James had not developed such a thick skin, and he felt decidedly angry and unsettled.

As the three reached the theater doors and stepped out into the night air, James glanced around to see if Petra was planning to join them for a soda at the campus tavern. She was nowhere

in sight amidst the dissipating throng, however. James lingered for a moment, looking for her without any success, and then turned and ran to catch up with his friends.



James' dreams were interrupted some hours later by a loud rapping at his dormitory room door. He startled and very nearly fell out of the narrow bed. Outside the door, a faint squeaking sound came, like the screech of old hinges.

"That brass monkey gives me the royal creeps," Ralph muttered, covering his head with his pillow. "Is that its voice?"

"I think its clockworks are too old to make a voice anymore," James yawned. "It just squeaks its jaw. That must be our four a.m. wake-up call."

Ralph swung his feet out of bed. "I never thought I'd say this, but I miss my old digital alarm clock."

Five minutes later, the boys sneaked out of the front door of the common dorm, closing it quietly behind them. The night was cool and still all around, wet with dew. The fountains had stopped running for the night, and even the birdbath gargoyles seemed to be asleep. Ralph wore his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, packed with the Zombie House flag.

"Do they have campus guards, you think?" he whispered as they began to steal through the darkness.

"Better safe than sorry," James answered. "Stick close to the trees. The moonlight is too bright for us to cross the main lawns."

Ralph huffed as they ran. "This was a lot easier when we had the Invisibility Cloak."

"Hopefully this is the only time this year we'll need it. It'll be fine. Just keep up."

By the time they reached the deep shadows of Administration Hall, James' trainers were soggy with dew and both boys were panting. They leaned against the cool bricks and caught their breath before slipping between the bushes and sneaking around to the rear of the building.

"All right," James whispered, hunkering in the shadow of a tall shrubbery. "This should be a snap. I'll climb up and switch the flags. You stay down here and keep an eye on me with your wand. If I fall, you and your wand will know what to do, right?"

“Levitate you,” Ralph nodded. “You want me just to see if I can levitate you right up there?”

James shook his head. “Too obvious. If I climb, I’ll stay in the shadows, so there’s less chance of getting caught. That moon’s like a searchlight tonight. Just be ready.”

“Get it over with,” Ralph said sincerely, slipping the duffle bag from his shoulder and offering it to James. “My stomach’s in knots already. Maybe we should have just gone for Igor House after all.”

James shook his head. “No turning back now, Ralph. Don’t worry, this’ll all be over in a few minutes.”

Ralph nodded, unconvinced but committed. James shouldered the bag and then turned toward the building. A series of narrow iron stairs and balconies clung to the rear of Administration Hall, stretching all the way up to the roof. James clambered up the first level as quietly as he could. Before long, the campus fell away beneath him, stretching out so wide that he could see the stone wall that surrounded it. Beyond the wall, the city of Philadelphia sparkled with lights, and James had time to wonder what year they were currently occupying. After only a few minutes, he reached the top level of the fire escape. He peered up at the bell tower that loomed before him. It seemed much larger this close up, each of the four bells approximately the size of a giant’s head, but far less lumpy. All around the inside of the bell tower, pigeons roosted by the dozens, dozing amid messy nests. James turned around and leaned over the railing. Far below, Ralph peered up at him, his face a round white dot in the darkness. James gave a halfhearted wave, and then turned and clambered up onto the angle of the roof, reaching for the wooden railing of the bell tower.

The inside of the tower stank of pigeon guano and age. A narrow wooden walkway ran around the perimeter of the tower, overlooking the dizzyingly deep throat of the tower. James held his breath and looked around. On the other side of the bell tower was a rickety circular stairway, leading up into the rafters. James made his way toward it, trying to ignore the squeak and groan of the planks beneath his feet. As he began to climb the narrow staircase, circling its central post, a wave of vertigo overtook him. The duffle bag felt very heavy and awkward on his back as he gripped the railing. He squeezed his eyes shut until the sensation passed, and then continued onward carefully.

An unlocked trapdoor opened easily at the top of the stairs and James clambered cautiously up onto the narrow floor of the belfry. He lay there for a moment, catching his breath and hugging the floor, afraid to look up, and a subtle noise pricked his ear. Slowly, he pushed himself upright and raised his head. The raftered ceiling of the belfry was black with bats. They shuffled and squeaked faintly, watching James.

His eyes went wide and he uttered a strangled little squeak of his own, getting his feet beneath him as he hunkered on the floor. He peered around and saw the ladder on the belfry’s right side. It was made of ancient painted wood, attached to the outside of the belfry beyond the low railing. Scuffling, James moved toward it. Beyond the railing, the wind switched suddenly, hooting in a nearby drainpipe. James shuddered. Finally, he leaned on the railing and reached over it, gripping the ladder. As carefully and quietly as he could, he pulled himself over the railing and clung to the ladder, which creaked ominously. Probably, it was magically fortified, as were nearly all old

magical structures. Still, the ledge of roof some twenty feet below seemed horribly narrow and the drop beyond that perfectly harrowing. James tried not to look. He gritted his teeth and began to climb.

Fortunately, there was one more trapdoor above the ladder, leading to a very narrow walkway around the conical roof of the belfry. James heaved himself up onto it and leaned against the angle of the narrow roof, breathing hard. With his foot, he kicked the trapdoor shut, not wishing to fall through it by accident. Above him, the huge old American flag, Old Betsy, flapped in the breeze. Finally, James worked his way partly around the cone of the roof, knelt in its shadow on the wooden walkway, and unslung the duffle bag from his shoulder. He began to draw out the Zombie flag, careful not to let the wind catch it and carry it away.

Suddenly, shockingly, James heard a scuffle of footsteps. They were very close by, but indistinct, lost in the rush of the wind. James froze, his eyes going wide.

Zane had said that the school administration was on the lookout for students engaged in the flag switch escapade. Had they seen him? Were they climbing up to catch him in the act? There was absolutely no place for him to hide. James peered around, but he could no longer see the trapdoor around the shape of the roof. He hunkered back against the old shingles, trying to blend in with the shadows as well as he could.

The scuffling came again, stealthy and quiet. Someone was sneaking up on him, apparently, trying to catch him by surprise. With a sigh, James decided that there was nothing for it but to turn himself in. He dropped the Zombie flag into a heap on top of the duffle bag, stood up, and found himself staring into the pale, surprised face of his own brother.

“James!” Albus rasped, and James realized that his brother had his wand in his hand. “What are you doing here?”

James looked his brother up and down and made a very quick deduction in his head. He sighed. “Same as you, apparently. Where’s the Werewolf flag?”

“Back behind me,” Albus said, stifling a laugh. “Is that...?” he asked, pointing his wand at the wad of fabric next to James’ feet. James nodded.

“You’re switching the flags,” James said. “Same as me. Did you know?”

“Not likely!” Albus replied in a harsh whisper. “Altaire said that no one else was going to do it this year because the heat was too high with the administration. So now what do we do?”

James didn’t hear his brother’s last question. Another scuffling sound came from behind him and a shadow rose into view. James saw a wand raised in a dark hand, pointing at Albus from behind.

“Al!” James cried, scrambling to produce his own wand. “Behind you!”

Albus turned, but not before the figure struck.

“*Petrificus Totalus!*” a female voice barked, and a bolt of magic seared from the upraised wand. It passed over Albus’ shoulder and struck James squarely in the chest. He went immediately stiff, frozen in place, and began to totter backwards.

The figure flicked her wand again and the Zombie flag at James’ feet rose up like a cloth snake. It coiled around James’ waist and knotted, leaving a long length behind it.

“Grab that, pledge,” the female voice said briskly.

Albus scrambled and snatched at the length of flag that trailed from James’ waist. A second later, the cloth went taut, catching James as he fell backwards against the old railing, breaking it.

“Ugh,” Albus grunted, shifting his stance and wrapping the length of flag around his fists. “You’re heavy. You know that, James? You need to lay off the Cockroach Clusters a bit.”

“This is your brother?” the figure asked, and James now saw that it was the dark girl from Werewolf House, the one that had made Albus do pushups the day before.

“Sir, yes sir!” Albus answered immediately.

The girl smiled tightly at James. “Lesson number twelve from the Werewolf handbook, pledge. Let me hear it.”

“‘He who strikes first strikes best!’” Albus announced, still struggling to hold onto the length of flag. James leaned back on his heels, frozen like a statue, but dreadfully aware of the precariousness of his position. Below him was only dark space, full of wind and the shush of the chestnut trees on the Hall lawn.

“That’s lesson number six,” the girl said. “But still appropriate, so I’ll let you off this time. Number twelve is ‘all’s fair in love and war...’”

“And there’s nothing other than love and war!” Albus finished confidently.

“Good work, pledge,” the girl nodded. “Hold on while I raise the Werewolf flag.”

James’ heart pounded as he watched the girl produce the flag from a camouflaged backpack. The flag was folded into a neat triangle shape, which she unfurled with a tap of her wand. A moment later, she used her wand to operate the pulleys of the flagpole, which jutted from the roof’s cone. With practiced economy, she switched the flags, folded Old Betsy reverently, and secured it in her backpack.

“Operation Capture the Flag is complete, pledge,” she said, straightening. “Which only leaves us to manage our prisoner of war. We have to assume he isn’t alone, but Raphael has probably already secured any hostiles on the ground. Can’t leave this one up here to replace the flags again once we decamp, which leaves us only one option. Lesson number three from the Werewolf handbook, pledge.”

“Neutralize any potential threat!” Albus quoted immediately. Behind him, the girl knotted the long end of the Zombie flag around a length of copper drainpipe. She smiled grimly.

“You do the honors, pledge,” she said. “Prove your Werewolf worthiness.”

Albus glanced over his shoulder at her, and then turned back to James, his face vaguely apologetic, but only vaguely. He smiled crookedly. “Sorry, James,” he said. “Lesson one in the Werewolf handbook: ‘A Werewolf’s gotta do what a Werewolf’s gotta do.’”

James tried to shake his head, but the spell still had him perfectly frozen. Albus let go of the flag and James immediately dropped backwards, tipping over the edge of the rooftop walkway. He fell for one sickening second, and then jerked to a halt, caught by the flag that was knotted around his waist. An explosion of noise suddenly surrounded him as the shock of his fall startled the bats in the tower belfry. They squeaked and boiled into the air, their wings thrashing all around him. A moment later, the noise of the bats’ departure died away and James swung gamely, turning dizzily on the end of his unusual tether. One of the bats perched on his head, squeaking amiably.

Nearby, he heard the diminishing tramp of footsteps on the ladder as well as the infuriating sound of smug, stifled laughter.



“You two,” Warrington said after a long fuming pause, “seem to have some basic misunderstanding of how the whole flag switch dare is supposed to go down.”

James slumped in the rickety chair in the attic office of Hermes House. Next to him, Ralph sighed and stared hard at the stained yellow carpet. Warrington leaned on the wobbly old desk, all four of whose legs seemed to have folded wads of paper under them.

The Zombie House office was tiny and crammed with bookshelves despite its noticeable lack of books. The shelves were, instead, heavy with unusual odds and ends, brick-a-brack, piles of unopened post, tools, amusingly shaped papier-mâché art projects, and the occasional skull, most wearing sunglasses and plastic noses. The wooden door was covered with a nearly life-sized poster photo of Theodore Hirshall Jackson caught in a stern pose, wagging a long finger at the viewer, his dark brow lowered. Construction paper letters were tacked above the poster’s head, spelling out the words ‘I WANT YOU to GIVE ME A HUG AND A COOKIE’.

Warrington stood up straight and paced along a narrow path worn through the room’s detritus, passing between the desk and the single round window. “The point, you see,” he went on in a strained voice, stabbing his right finger at his left palm, “is to *not* make Zombie House look like a bunch of bumbling nincompoops. Anything beyond that is, frankly, gravy. Gravy!”

Warrington punched an inflatable doll made to resemble a rather ghastly clown. It bobbed on its weighted base and swung back, squeaking.

“They were Werewolves,” Ralph moaned weakly. “I barely saw them before they dropped on me like a piano. They were wearing camouflage! They had bits of bushes stuck to their hats! I thought I was being attacked by some kind of weird American dryad monsters!”

“They were *Werewolves!*” Warrington hissed, rounding on the boys, his eyes wild. He struggled to compose himself and swiped a hand over his face, sighing vehemently. “Look. You’re new here, so I’ll give you a helpful little lesson on the intricate societal politics that define life here in the hallowed halls of the Aleron. *We hate the Werewolves.* Here endeth the lesson. Got it?”

“But they had actual members helping out the pledge, who just happened to be my brother,” James rallied. “They attacked us before we had a chance to react!”

“That’s how Werewolves work!” Warrington cried, exasperated. “They’re Werewolves, for Zark’s sake! To them, everything’s a battlefield! Their one weakness is when people yank the battlefield out from under them! *That’s* the *Zombie* way!”

Ralph raised both hands, palms up. “But what could we have done?”

“Gummy shoes!” Warrington rasped, deadpan. “Stick them to the ground like flies on flypaper! Or the Jelly-Legs Jinx, or Tickling Hexes, or even spontaneous explosive intestinal gas. You can’t just face down a Werewolf, you have to embarrass them. Their insufferable pride is their ultimate weakness. Any *Zombie* knows that!”

“Sorry,” James said miserably, “we’re new to all of this. They got to us before we had a chance to respond. We’ll do better next time. Give us one more chance!”

Warrington boggled at James. He spluttered, “They left you hanging by the *Zombie* flag from the belfry landing! The entire school saw you up there before Franklyn was able to get you down! You made us a laughingstock! *Zombies do* the laughing, pledge! Not the other way around!”

“*Now* whose pride is at stake?” Ralph mumbled.

“And you,” Warrington said, turning to Ralph, his eyes blazing. “I’m surprised you can talk at all, after being hung up on the Hermes House flagpole for the last three hours! If you could die of wedgies, we’d be arranging your funeral right about now!”

Behind Ralph and James came the sound of stifled laughter. James turned around. Against the rear wall, in an old clawfoot chair with threadbare upholstery, sat the President of *Zombie* House, a small dapper man with what appeared to be, for all intents and purposes, goat’s legs. He was dressed in a tailored jacket with tails, an immaculately tied yellow ascot, and a natty gray vest. Two stubby purplish horns adorned his temples. His name, James now knew, was Professor Felix Stanford Cloverhoof, and he was apparently a faun, also known, for some reason, as the Jersey Devil.

“I’m sorry,” Cloverhoof said, recovering himself and assuming a serious expression. “Do continue, Mr. Warrington. You are on quite a roll.”

"I'm done," Warrington said, moving back around the desk and plopping into his chair, which squeaked in protest. "With both of them."

"I'm afraid that Mr. Warrington is quite right, my friends," Cloverhoof said breezily, climbing to his hooved feet. He straightened his vest and picked a fleck of dust from his lapel. "Zombie House does have its standards, ill-defined and amorphous as they are. I quite suspect that you will be rather happier elsewhere."

"But..." James exclaimed, stammering. "But, but...!"

"I had a rather lengthy discussion about the affair with the Chancellor this morning after he... er... *extracted* the both of you from your various predicaments. I agree with his assessment entirely. There is really only one house for students with your particular... ahem... aptitudes."

"Oh no," Ralph moaned. "Not Igor House."

Cloverhoof blinked at Ralph and smiled a little crookedly. "Igor House?" he said inquiringly. "No, not quite. Come along boys. The morning is well begun and surely you have classes to attend to. Tonight, you will begin life in your new society. Surely you will fit in very nicely."

"Which house?" James asked unhappily, standing up and moving toward the door as the faun professor swung it open.

"Why, I'd have thought it was obvious," Cloverhoof replied brightly. "Frankly, I'm surprised you didn't rush there in the first place. The Chancellor has determined that you should be assigned to Bigfoot House. I'm quite certain that you will find it very... er... reassuring."

James and Ralph slumped where they stood.

From the desk behind them, Warrington grinned wickedly. "See you on the Clutch course, boys!" he announced, and chuckled humorlessly.



"I don't see what the big deal is about Bigfoot House," Lucy said, rolling her eyes. The sun was setting over the campus, painting long purple shadows over the lawns and footpaths as the students made their way back from dinner in the cafeteria.

"That's because *you* got into the house you rushed for," Ralph grumped. "You've got the blood red tie to prove it."

“Looks excellent too,” Zane added.

Lucy smiled demurely. “Thank you. But the point is, you were probably never meant to be in Zombie House anyway, and if you’d ended up there, you probably would’ve been totally miserable.”

“Hush your mouth!” Zane exclaimed, covering his ears with his hands. “That’s the Zombies you’re talking about!”

“And a fine bunch they are, I’m sure,” Lucy soothed. “Just not for James and Ralph. Obviously it fits *you* like a suit of armor. Albeit, yellow armor, with a clown’s wig on the top.”

“Now you’re talking,” Zane nodded, mollified.

“But Bigfoot House,” James moaned. “They’re the *nobody* dorm.”

“In that case, it fits you two perfectly,” Albus said, coming up from behind.

James glanced back at his brother darkly. “When did you get here, you big turncoat?”

“At least my turncoat comes with a burgundy tie,” Albus replied, brushing off his blazer and peering critically down at himself. “Pretty dashing, isn’t it?”

Ralph narrowed his eyes. “You ever hear the phrase ‘blood is thicker than water’?”

“I haven’t gotten that far in Potions yet,” Albus answered breezily.

In a careful voice, Lucy said, “That *was* a rather awful thing to do, Albus, leaving your brother up there like that.”

“Oh, he was fine,” Albus waved a hand. “It was either him or me. Before I was a Werewolf, I was a Slytherin, remember, and we Slytherins take every break we can get. It’s the Gryffindors that are all self-sacrificing and noble. If you look at it that way, I was just helping James to be true to his heritage.”

James flung out an arm and backhanded his brother on the shoulder, shoving him backwards. “I’ll show you a thing or two about nobility, you sodding git!”

“Ah, ah, ah...,” Albus warned, wagging a finger at his brother. “Werewolves look out for each other. Now that I wear the gray and burgundy, anything you do to me is likely to be repaid by the Brotherhood of the Wolf. I’m just giving you fair warning. I don’t want to see you get hurt, big brother.”

“‘Brotherhood of the Wolf’,” Zane scoffed. “There isn’t a real werewolf in the bunch. If any of your *brotherhood* was confronted by a *real* wolf, they’d scurry like mice.”

Albus rounded on Zane. “But Zombie House is full of the walking undead, right? At least in terms of brainpower, from what I hear.”

“Them’s fightin’ words!” Zane proclaimed stridently.

“Will you both shut it,” Lucy interrupted, getting between the two of them and placing a hand on each one’s chest, pushing them apart. “This is a silly thing to argue about. Everyone knows that *both* the Werewolves and Zombies cower before the dark mystery of Vampire House.”

Zane spluttered while Albus pushed Lucy’s hand away. She smiled haughtily, raised her chin, and walked on.

“She sure picked *that* up fast,” Ralph said, impressed.

“Come on,” Zane urged irritably, yanking Ralph’s elbow. “The Bigfoots’ mansion is over here. Let’s get you inside and introduced to your new pals. I’ve never even seen the inside of the dorm since I’ve never been friends with any Bigfeets.”

James sighed as they walked toward the staid brick structure. Apollo Mansion, home of Bigfoot House, was by far the least interesting of the houses. It stood square and straight in the orange sunset, looking like a sentinel guarding something nobody really wanted. There was virtually no landscaping around the mansion except for a few squat shrubberies that ranged around the foundation in a businesslike manner. A short stone stairway led to the front door, which was adorned with a large pewter knocker in the shape of a foot with splayed toes.

“So, are there any actual Bigfoots in Bigfoot House?” Ralph asked as they climbed the steps.

“Maybe,” Zane shrugged. “That would put them on a level higher than either the Werewolves or the Vampires. They haven’t had any real werewolves or vampires in their houses for centuries.”

James asked, “What about the Pixies, Igors, and Zombies?”

“I don’t know about the Pixies or Igors,” Zane said, reaching for the huge knocker, “but the old President of Zombie House was this crotchety professor named Straidthwait, and he taught class for nearly a week before anyone knew he’d died of brain failure or something. Apparently, he’d spent too much time in deepest Africa during a summer vacation and drank a few too many native potions. Once he found out he was dead, he insisted on being buried in the campus cemetery, ambulatory or not.” Zane grinned at James and Ralph and clacked the door knocker three times, shaking the big wooden door.

“You’re making that up,” Ralph insisted. “They didn’t bury him alive!”

Zane shook his head. “He *wasn’t* alive. He was dead as a doorknob. Said so himself. I hear he performed his own eulogy and told everyone that he was looking forward to being buried. Said it was going to be like the ultimate retirement. It’s engraved on his tomb, in fact. I’ll show you sometime.”

“No thanks,” Ralph replied as the door opened. A small boy with pasty skin and huge glasses looked up at Zane.

“I know you,” he said meekly. “You gave me donkey’s ears last year.”

“Did I?” Zane blinked, thinking. “Could be. I gave a lot of people donkey’s ears last year. It was all the rage. Hurt, did it?”

The boy stared up at Zane. “No. But it made me want to eat lots of carrots. And it made it easier to hear the lectures in Mageography. I didn’t mind, really.”

“Good man,” Zane said heartily, clapping the boy on the shoulder. The boy tottered.

“I’m James,” James said, stepping forward. “And this here’s Ralph. We’re... er... Bigfoots.”

“You sure are,” the boy said, looking up and down at Ralph.

“I remember you,” Zane said, squinting. “Pastingon, right?”

“Paddington,” the boy corrected. “Wentworth Paddington.”

“Can we come in?” Ralph asked hopefully. “Only, we’d like to get settled into our new rooms. If we have to sleep in the common dorm with that crazy clockwork monkey for one more night...”

“Oh, sure,” the boy said blandly, stepping backwards. “Everything’s pretty much wherever you find it. The dormitories are all up on the third floor. Game room’s in the basement. Everything in between is what it is.”

James stepped into the foyer of the house. It was neat and high with a small unlit chandelier dangling overhead. A dusty banner drooped from the chandelier, faded with age. Dark blue letters on an orange background spelled the words ‘BIGFOOT PRUDE’.

“Oh, that,” Wentworth said, following James’ gaze. “That was made by Kowalski’s mom when he was a freshman. English isn’t exactly her first language, but Kowalski was so proud of it that we couldn’t bring ourselves to take it down.”

Zane nodded up at the banner. “Makes perfect sense to me, Went. So where’s the party at anyway?”

Wentworth blinked behind his huge glasses. “Party?”

“Where’s the rest of your Bigfoot pals?” Zane clarified. “And your president? James and Ralph here should probably meet them all, shouldn’t they?”

“Oh,” Wentworth said uncertainly. “Sure. I guess so. Come on.” He turned and padded away, heading toward a huge stairway that dominated the main hall. After a sidelong glance at Ralph and Zane, James followed.

As the four descended into the mansion’s basement, they heard a babble of voices and the clack and clatter of billiard balls. Turning a landing at the base of the stairs, James found himself in a low, cluttered room, filled with mismatched sofas and chairs, end tables, and a small galaxy of lamps with battered shades. Students lounged in groups throughout the space or drifted around a collection of very antique game tables in the dimmer recesses of the basement room. A huge white refrigerator sat like a deflated blimp in the corner, flanked by a stuffed deer’s head on one side and a moose head on the other. The moose head wore a tasseled nightcap and seemed to be sleeping. None of the occupants of the room looked up as James, Ralph, and Zane entered.

“He’s over there,” Wentworth pointed. “In the middle, with his feet on the disarmadillo.”

James followed Wentworth's gesture and saw the President of Bigfoot House lounging on a low orange sofa, his feet propped on a small animal that appeared to be half aardvark and half tank. James recognized the man as the one who had sat next to his father at Professor Longbottom's assembly. With a start, he realized that his father was sitting next to the man even now, laughing happily and holding a bottle of some American beer. Harry saw his son from across the room, grinned and waved him over.

"I heard you'd been assigned to Bigfoot House," he called as James, Ralph, and Zane threaded through the various chairs and tables. "You couldn't have found a better home. Er, no matter *what* path got you here," he added, smiling crookedly.

"Hey, Mr. Potter," Zane grinned, plopping onto a nearby chair.

James settled onto a low, bowed sofa and sighed. "So you heard, eh?"

"I suspect most of magical Philadelphia knows by now," Harry replied. "You're a Potter, after all. Your picture will probably be on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* by tomorrow morning, along with a pithy caption written by Rita Skeeter herself."

James slumped on the sofa. "Bloody hell. You really think so?"

"Who cares? You won't be there to see it, at least."

Zane stroked his chin. "Knowing Rose, she'll cut it out and send it to you, though." He glanced at Ralph, who nodded.

"*However* you got here," the man on the sofa next to Harry smiled, "Bigfoot House is proud to have you." The man was relatively young and quite thin with a neat dark haircut and mild features. James could tell by his lack of American accent that he was not originally from the United States.

"Yeah, well, we're glad to finally have a home, I guess," Ralph commented. "Even being a leftover is better than being stuck in the common dorm."

"Oh, we don't have leftovers in Bigfoot House," the House President said, straightening and producing his wand from a back pocket. "All Bigfoots are essential members of the clan. One for all and all for one. Go orange and blue!" With that, the man pointed his wand at James. There was a flash and James startled. He glanced down at himself and saw that his black tie had been transformed to a bright autumn orange, and his blazer was now dark blue. Another flash lit the room and Ralph's uniform was transformed as well.

"Not so handsome as Zombie yellow," Zane said critically, "but better than plain black at any rate. You were starting to look like those stiffies from the Magical Integration Bureau."

"Everyone listen up," the president of the house announced loudly, taking his feet off the disarmadillo and sitting up straight. "This is James Potter and Ralph Deedle, the newest members of Bigfoot House. Let's show them a nice welcome, eh?"

Halfhearted cheers and applause filled the room, lingering rather pathetically as the president beamed at James and Ralph. The disarmadillo wandered slowly away, sniffing at the skirts of the

sofas and munching the occasional piece of stale popcorn. When the noise of the cheers finally petered out, James flopped back into the depths of the sofa again.

“So how do you two know each other anyway?” he asked, looking back and forth between his dad and the Bigfoot President.

“Oh, your father and I go way back,” the president smiled. “I helped make him the man he is today, in fact. Gave him his first shot, back when he was just a little squitter who barely knew how to hold a wand.”

“I think it was Professor McGonagall who actually got me on the team,” Harry corrected, shaking his head and smiling. “You just taught me what I needed to know to not get killed on the pitch.”

“And a good job I did, too!”

“Anyway,” Harry laughed, “as it turns out, James, yours and Ralph’s new house is headed up by one of the best professors on campus. He came to the States years ago and, for reasons I can’t even begin to guess, decided not to leave. James, Ralph, this is my old friend and fellow Gryffindor, your new president, Oliver Wood.”

“Wood!” Zane proclaimed, smacking his forehead. “*That’s* your name, not Birch. I was close, though, wasn’t I?” He grinned aside at James and Ralph.

“Hey,” Wentworth said, tapping James on the shoulder. “There’s this big owl on the stairs out front, hooting like crazy and trying to get in the front door. I’m guessing he’s yours. You want me to show him to the tower? Or will he be, um... staying with you?”

“Nobby’s here!” Zane said climbing to his feet. “Home sweet home all over the place. Come on. I’ll help you Bigfoots carry your stuff over from the common dorm. No house-elves in the States, so you gotta do all the footwork yourself. Get it?” he grinned, nudging James. “*Footwork?*”

“I got it,” James said, smiling helplessly. He rolled his eyes, and the three boys clambered back up the steps, heading outside.



One hour later, James stood in the middle of the upstairs bedroom of the common dorm and stared down at his right hand, his eyes wide. On the floor at his feet lay his duffle bag, unzipped and

gaping open, where he had just dropped it. He was surprised that he could still hear Zane and Ralph in the hallway outside, struggling to fit Ralph's things into the rickety dumbwaiter. In the center of James' right palm, a soft silver glow was still fading away, like a ball of stormlight.

He shuddered, not knowing what had just happened, but knowing that whatever it was, it was very important. It simply didn't make any sense.

"Merlin," he whispered to himself, his eyes wide. Merlin would understand. He would know. James had just come from seeing him, as per the Headmaster's request, but it wasn't too late to go back again. He hunkered down carefully and reached to zip his duffle bag again, careful not to brush his fingers against the small parchment packet just inside.

After visiting his new house and meeting Oliver Wood, the Bigfoot House President and inexplicable friend of his father (Wood's name had rung a faint bell in James' memory, but if his father had talked about him, it had been a long time ago), things had gotten decidedly weirder as the night progressed.

On the way to the common dorm, James had remembered to stop in at the guest house in the hopes of catching Merlinus before his departure. Seeing his father in the basement of Apollo Mansion had reminded James of his appointment with the Headmaster, and he was very curious about whatever it was the old man meant to give him. Merlin had indeed been there, engaged in what appeared to be a serious discussion in the parlor with Chancellor Franklyn and Neville Longbottom. The room had quieted almost immediately as James, Ralph, and Zane had entered, and James had the distinct sense that it was an uncomfortable pause, brittle as glass. Merlin had welcomed the boys and excused himself from the gathering, claiming that he'd only be absent for a moment.

In the upstairs rooms of the guest house, Merlin had shown the boys to his trunk. Ralph and James had seen it before since it was the very same trunk that they had helped the great wizard retrieve from an ocean cave early last year. It was unusually small—deceptively so, since its nested doors and drawers could open onto still more nested doors and drawers in a rather eye-bending display of conserved magical space. For now, however, Merlin had slipped only one drawer open. The drawer was long and shallow, containing a flat, square object wrapped in cloth. Merlin retrieved it and held it out to James with both hands.

"Last year," he said, "I told you about the effects of very magical objects upon the earth. I told you how they tend to leave very large footprints on the landscape of reality, and that the age of very magical objects was drawing to a close. Upon further reflection, I have determined that this is far truer than even I had known. Contrary to what I originally believed, the balance of the wizarding world is very precarious in this time. The weight of the extremely magical is enough to affect that balance. I realized that, in the name of that balance, I must do something that I very much did not wish to do. This is the result."

James accepted the object, which was about the size of a small tray and about the same shape. Carefully, he unwrapped it and looked down at it in his hands.

“Cool,” Zane said, peering over James’ shoulder. “Now you can comb that bird’s nest you call a haircut.”

Ralph shook his head over James’ other shoulder. “Somehow, I think that’s for something besides just checking your hair on the way to class.”

The thing in James’ hands was a mirror in a simple silver frame, apparently perfectly normal except that it felt unusually heavy in his hands. James didn’t know if it was the frame or the mirror itself that gave the object its weight. He glanced inquiringly up at Merlin.

“It is, in fact, perfectly appropriate for viewing yourself in,” the Headmaster nodded, smiling. “But Mr. Deedle is quite right. That is not all it is good for. Do you happen to have your wand upon you, James?”

James nodded. He set the mirror onto a nearby table and produced his wand from a pocket sewn into the inside of his blazer.

“Excellent,” Merlin said, stepping aside. “Now tap the glass and say ‘mirror, mirror shard of three, show me where I wish to be.’”

James narrowed his eyes up at the big wizard.

“Go on, James,” Zane prodded. “Make with the magic. I’m dying of curiosity here.”

James shrugged and tapped the glass with his wand, repeating the phrase exactly as Merlin had said it. As one, the three boys leaned forward, filling the mirror’s surface with their reflections. Almost immediately, however, the reflection sank away, replaced by a swirling silvery fog. James and Ralph recognized it almost immediately.

“The *Amsera Certh*?” James asked breathlessly. “But...” He stopped, distracted by a scene that seemed to swim up from the depths of the Mirror, as if its surface was the face of a very deep pool. The image shimmered and resolved into the unmistakable shapes of the Gryffindor common room, albeit dark and empty, with only the ruddy glow of the fireplace illuminating its furnishings.

“No way!” Zane exclaimed. “It’s Hoggies! But where’s everybody at?”

“It’s the middle of the night there, you big div!” Ralph laughed. “But is that really what we’re seeing? Is it really Hogwarts?”

“It is,” Merlin nodded.

“But how?” James asked, turning to peer back at the Headmaster. “If this is the *Amsera Certh*, why’s it so small? And why would you give it to us?”

“It is as I said,” Merlin replied, his face somber. “The magical world is simply too precarious to bear the weight of such extremely magical objects as the *Amsera Certh*. I determined that I must break it up, divide its powers, in order to prevent its influence from adversely impacting the fabric of reality. The truth is, now that I know of the existence of such things as the Vault of Destinies, I am even more confident that I have made the right choice.”

“What about the Focusing Book?” Ralph asked, referring to the book that was the magical counterpart to the original Magic Mirror.

“Destroyed forever,” Merlin sighed. “As with the Mirror of Erised, the *Amsera Certh* is reduced to only its most basic and illusionary powers without the aid of its Focusing Book. With the Book destroyed, and the Mirror divided, its impact upon the world is far lighter. I used my arts to enchant this bit of the Mirror, connecting it to the mirror over the hearth in your former dormitory common room, James. With its help, you will be able to see and interact with your friends at home whenever you wish. I have given your father another Shard, similarly enchanted, which will allow him to speak to his associates at the Ministry of Magic.”

“Excellent!” Zane nodded. “This is way better than using lunarflies and doppelgangers. Raphael will be dead jealous when he hears about this.”

“Alas,” Merlin said gravely, “you must not tell anyone about the Shard. As divided and diminished as its powers are, it must still be kept hidden from those who would wish to use its magic for wicked purposes. Use it to communicate with your friends as you wish, but tell no one here what the Mirror can do or what its origins are. Can you swear obedience to these requirements?”

“Sure,” James answered slowly, nodding. “But... I mean, is it... safe?”

“If you are referring to your inadvertent usage of the *Amsera Certh* last term,” Merlin said, smiling crookedly, “I assure you, the Mirror’s days of capricious trickery are quite over. Like any magical tool, this Shard is exactly as safe as that which you might choose to do with it.”

James nodded, relieved. “Nice. Thanks, Headmaster. We’ll be extra careful with it. And we won’t tell anyone else about it. Will we?”

The other two boys agreed easily and James rewrapped the Shard in its cloth. Shortly, Merlin bid the three boys goodbye and rejoined Professor Longbottom and Chancellor Franklyn in the guest room’s parlor. James waved goodbye to Neville, and then, in a lower voice, told him that he’d done an excellent job putting those Progressive Element rabble-rousers in their place at the previous night’s assembly. Neville nodded sheepishly and thanked James.

“Enjoy your new surroundings, boys,” Franklyn said. “I suspect you will find yourselves quite at home within the halls of Apollo Mansion.”

James nodded, feeling dismissed and not particularly liking it. Ralph, however, dragged him by the elbow and a minute later, the three had ducked out of the rear door of the guest house and crossed into the shadow of the common dorm. It had grown rather darker by then, with low clouds obscuring the few stars. The wind switched restlessly and hissed in the tall grass that surrounded the buildings.

Inside, Ralph and Zane manhandled the larger trunks out into the hallway, lugging them toward the dumbwaiter and the waiting clockwork monkey. James slung his duffle bag over his shoulder and unzipped it awkwardly, meaning to stuff the Shard inside it along with his dirty laundry and toiletries. He turned comically on his feet, reaching around himself to work the Shard into the depths of the bag on his shoulder, and suddenly, shockingly, the world went away.

There was no disorienting sense of speed and no jolt, as with Apparition or Portkeys. The world simply clicked off like a light, and in its place was darkness. James sensed himself still standing, but there seemed to be nothing around him. Emptiness pressed on him like weights, and when he opened his mouth to call out, there didn't seem to be any air, either to breathe or to conduct sound waves.

Panic gripped him suddenly, but before he could act upon it, the darkness swept away. It was as if a monstrous wind blew, bringing with it brightness and light, a ghastly, dead environment, a sky like a gravestone and a looming, black shape, hideous and somehow prehistoric, the architectural equivalent of a petrified dragon. The scene boiled all around James, perfectly still but impossible to look at, as if it was comprised of darning needles, all poking toward him, assaulting his senses. James tried to recoil from the sights, but he was unable to move. A voice came out of the vision, huge and clanging, as if it was the voice of the sky and the earth itself. "She watches," the voice said calmly. "She watches and she waits. Soon I must go to her. It is the only way."

James recognized the voice immediately, even though he'd never heard it sound so huge and terrible. It was the voice of Petra Morganstern. It was the voice of Morgan.

And then, as suddenly as it began, the vision blew away. The dormitory room sprang back into existence around James again, feeling tiny and hot, remarkably mundane in the wake of the teeming vision. A thump came from the ground at James' feet and he looked down dully. His duffle bag had slipped from his shoulder and fallen to the floor. The wrapped Shard poked from the unruly clothing inside. Next to it, unearthed from the depths of the laundry, was Petra's dream story, compressed into a small dense packet of parchment. It glowed very faintly with silvery light.

James raised his right palm and saw the thread there, the one that had connected him to Petra when she had fallen from the stern of the *Gwyndemere*. The thread trailed off like a line of smoke, vanishing after a few feet, fading even as he watched. Somehow, the silver thread was still there, connecting him to her. More importantly, that connection had triggered something when he had touched her dream story. It had been a vision, but one so powerful and shocking that he'd barely been able to register it. Something, he felt quite sure, was happening with Petra, possibly at this very moment. Was something bad happening to her?

Was she *causing* something bad to happen?

A minute later, James joined Ralph and Zane in the hallway. They forced the dumbwaiter doors shut, enclosing the luggage and the clockwork monkey inside. With a ratcheting clatter, the dumbwaiter began to descend toward the lobby below.

"What's with you?" Zane asked, peering sideways at James. "You look white as a ghost."

James shook his head. "I don't know. I think... something's happening."

"Something's always happening, isn't it?" Ralph frowned as they clumped down the stairs.

"I don't know..." James said again, faintly.

They retrieved the trunks from the dumbwaiter and began to lug them out onto the common dorm's stoop.

“Whoa,” Ralph said suddenly, looking up. “What’s going on over there?”

James didn’t want to look, but did anyway. The sky had lowered ever further. It swirled unnaturally over a point nearby, like a very slow, inverted cyclone. Lightning flickered silently in the clouds and wind switched restlessly over the campus, whickering in the trees and scouring dead leaves over the footpaths.

“Where are you going?” Zane called as James stepped slowly down onto the lawn, watching the sky. He didn’t answer. Instead, he moved along the lawn, skirting the fountain and its birdbath gargoyles, keeping his eye on the strange, swirling cauldron of clouds. It was making a noise, a sort of dull rumble, like the sound of a hundred freight trains in the dark distance. It was very nearly a growl.

“Is that... you know... normal?” Ralph asked Zane as they moved alongside James. “Like, tell me that it’s some sort of side effect of the way the school jumps around in time, right?”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before,” Zane answered seriously.

James lowered his eyes from the swirling purple maelstrom of the clouds and found himself looking at the squat mass of the Hall of Archives. The stormy phenomenon was directly above the building.

“She watches,” James heard himself say. “She watches and she waits.”

A tongue of lightning connected the clouds and the Hall of Archives, and the ground leapt beneath James’ feet. A blast of purple light illuminated the building from within, spearing through every crack and from the seams of every brick. Pencil beams shot from the tiny windows in the domed roof, spearing up into the sky. A split second later, the light was gone, leaving only blinding green afterimages on James’ retinas.

“What,” Zane asked in an awed voice, “was that?”

James shook his head very slowly. The sky seemed to have exhausted itself. The clouds broke up slowly overhead and there was a lingering coppery taste in the air. In the darkness beneath the Hall of Archives portico, the door opened. Two figures strode out into the dusky evening light and descended the steps. One of them was robed in black from head to toe and James found himself thinking of the mysterious woman whom he had first met in the midnight halls of the Aquapolis, the one who had appeared again later, during the attack on the *Zephyr*, and then vanished afterwards. She walked on into the deepening darkness, but the second figure lingered for a moment on the footpath, looking around slowly.

“Is that...?” Ralph began, but there was no point in finishing the question. All three boys could see who it was.

It was Petra. She looked around with interest, as if seeing the campus for the first time. Her dark eyes stopped when she saw the three boys, but it was James that she seemed to focus on. She smiled slowly. And then she waved.

“What is happening here?” a voice demanded shrilly. James turned around and saw Chancellor Franklyn moving swiftly across the darkened campus, nearing them. His face looked

very pale in the stormy darkness. Merlin and Neville Longbottom were following him, looking around carefully.

“Did you feel it?” Zane asked. “The ground shook! Right when the lightning happened! Pow!”

Franklyn passed the boys with barely a glance, approaching the Hall of Archives and its open door. The dim lights that had previously shown from the building’s tiny windows had been extinguished in the aftermath of the blast.

“Oh dear,” Franklyn muttered darkly. “Oh great heavens. What has happened...?”

Merlin stopped near James. Without taking his eyes from the Hall of Archives, he asked in a very low voice, “Did you see anyone?”

James considered lying. For a moment, he considered telling Merlin that he hadn’t seen anything at all, especially not Petra looking strange and vaguely malevolent. The moment passed.

“I saw Petra,” he answered quietly, almost whispering. “She and someone else—a woman I think—came out of the Hall right after... whatever it was.”

Merlin nodded slowly, with grave emphasis. He didn’t say anything in response. He didn’t need to.

Thus endeth chapter nine. 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.