

## Prologue

Narration

When: Before our story begins, August, 1890

Where: The void of thoughts and recollection

My name is Aerith Gainsborough. And for all my life, and I say “for all my life” but really I only just turned fifteen so it hasn’t been *that* long, I was just a normal girl, with a normal life. My parents had recently begun hinting it was about time to marry me off, girls being more of a burden on a family than boys. So sorry to have been born! But I had been, and life had been going on in the normal way since then. We hadn’t had any plagues recently, which was nice. I didn’t have much hope for further education and as my parents were not all that wealthy, being a servant or working the fields was about all I had to look forward to. That, and being pregnant almost continuously until I died, years later. I had lost my share of brothers and sisters, life was rather unforgiving and cruel it seemed, even in the modern times approaching the year nineteen hundred. Such was the fate of girls, I thought. At least, until I got the letter... but I’m getting ahead of myself.

Of course I had my share of secrets, what fifteen year old doesn’t, but these secrets kept me apart from everyone else in various ways. For starters, I always believed I belonged in another world, doing something related to clouds of all things. But I’ve never really been all that interested in the weather here, so that feeling of “otherness” is quite unexplained. I have the sense of a great sacrifice on that world, a sacrifice on my part to be specific, and thinking about it, and those I left behind, always makes me a little sad.

Another thing that set me apart from my peers is my sense of danger. Don’t ask me how, but ever since I was little nothing could surprise me even from behind. If someone threw something at me, like a snowball, I just got this tingle in my head and dodged it. I knew where it was coming from and even what level of danger I was in. It didn’t help me avoid falling or tripping over something, just external threats to my person. No one wanted to do snowball fights with me because unless I tried to ignore it, no one could hit me. And that wasn’t fun. For them, it wasn’t fun for the others. So sorry I don’t want to be hit by a speeding ball of frozen water! But it was my third and most powerful ability that truly gave me an edge over others.

I could move backwards in time.

Let me clarify. It wasn’t as though I could send all of time flowing backwards, like a stream running up hill. So if I made a fool of myself dropping something or wasn’t sure what to say I couldn’t simply walk backwards again and undo that moment. Rather at any point I could take a breath, center myself, and really *look* at my surroundings. I could fix that moment in my mind, and then at a later time actually return to that point! This allowed me to mainly stay out of trouble because every morning I would replace one of these “frozen moments” with a new one, and if something truly awful happened to me that day I could return to that same morning and try something different.

I had hinted to others I had this ability, as it occurred to me a few years ago that they seemed to allow bad things to happen to them with regularity. If everyone could do what I could do how could anything really bad happen to everyone? But my hints of “don’t you wish you could just go back to this morning and try the whole day over?” were met with laughs and an “I wish that were possible”

sentiment. So it seemed I was unique in that regard, and kept the fact I could do something so incredible to myself. It did allow me to learn things more easily, as I could practice them over and over across the “same” day if needed, there didn’t seem to be any limit on how many times I could go “back.” I would always remember what I had done, even if no one else did. Luckily any injuries would go away when I did this as well, so as long as I didn’t trip on some stairs and break my neck I could always go back and make things right. There was a limit on how many of these moments I could reasonably keep track of, I couldn’t just keep making them every hour or anything like that, but I kept a yearly one from the beginning of the year, one every month, and then refreshed the daily one, well, daily. This way if something happened to begin several weeks ago that I didn’t notice, such as a friend getting mercury poisoning from one of those awful “cure anything” remedies you often see for sale at the chemists’ I could go further back and fix it. Annoying to have to live weeks or months all over again but it would be a small price to pay. And I would always know what was coming!

What I didn’t see coming (by owl, no less) was the letter I referenced earlier, inviting me to a place called Hogwarts to learn to become a witch. I was of course cautioned not to tell my parents about that part, only that it was a boarding school of some renown, because getting burned at the stake would ruin anyone’s day even mine. I simply noted my surroundings, told them, and when they did in fact react poorly to the news I could learn to use magic simply returned in time and followed the letter’s suggestion. As I told them it was all paid for because of my “unique talents that caught our eye” they did something I hadn’t expected. They looked at me seriously and actually *asked me* if I wanted to attend this far away school. This set me back on my heels a bit, it was the first time they had asked me what I wanted, rather than simply making a decision for me. With the prospect of magic use before me, escaping some kind of arranged marriage as they had been hinting, and actually getting more education of one kind of another (it was still a school after all) I jumped at the chance. And for a wonder they said okay, and allowed me to attend!

I wrote back as quickly as I could that I accepted their invitation, and to please forward more details as my situation was rather unique. It seemed I would be behind my peers who had started at the school some years ago, I had been skipped over for unexplained reasons but was now registering to whatever magical artifacts they used to find prospective students. So I would have to work hard to catch up, something I had to chuckle at because I could tackle a different subject each week for months or years if I had to, and still wind up at whatever opening ceremony they had far more knowledgeable than any of my teachers! I realized I had no way to send the letter but noticed the same owl hanging around outside and handed it off to them through the open window. This seemed to satisfy the bird as it gave a head bob and flew off, letter in beak. I couldn’t wait to pack and start my new life!

I was visited the next day by Professor Eleazar Fig who dropped off several books, a second hand wand, and explained a bit about the laws relating to magic I would now have to follow. To prove I could, indeed, be a witch he showed me a very basic spell I could practice on my own. Basically just a flick of the wand that shot out a red burst of magic that could smash pottery or glass to splinters. I was cautioned to only use it when unobserved, and to only point my wand at unbreakable things such as rocks as even this simple spell could kill a person with minimal effort. (I wasn’t sure how I felt about being taught such a dangerous thing but he said just about *any* spell could kill someone with a bit of ingenuity. That’s why they normally didn’t allow magic use outside the classroom until adulthood. Smart, I agreed.) He was pleased to see that even with a wand that wasn’t “my own” I could manage this spell without too much effort, and he left with instructions to practice. So naturally I did, for about two months of my personal time. When I could reasonably hit what I aimed it, and could smash apart logs for firewood without effort, I stopped going back and awaited Professor Fig to call upon me again. He did, several times, to check on my progress and make sure I hadn’t attracted any unwanted attention. (So it seemed even in the magical world, the ability to “go back” may be unknown?) With the magical burst mastered he showed me two more “useful” spells, a shield and a spell to dazzle an

attacker. The magical world must be pretty dangerous if this was the sort of thing kids learned first at this school I thought. But I mastered those as well, much to his delight. He offered no other spells, however, just told me to keep practicing those until I could almost do them in my sleep. Very odd. He didn't realize I had already spent "weeks" mastering them, so I spent a few days without going back continuing to hone them, and finally it was time to go.

The day before term started was to be our last meeting, he would pick me up in the city to take a "carriage" to the school. I packed up my meager belongings and made my way to the place we were to meet, where a carriage, seemingly on its own, rolled up next to me. Professor Fig greeted me as he jumped out, and my adventure began.

## Chapter 1

This is a bad omen

When: End of August, 1890

Where: Outside the carriage to Hogwarts, London, England

The streets were dark and misty as the carriage rolled up beside Aerith onto the narrow street. Buildings of brick and stone lined both sides of the cobblestone road, and the carriage bounced and groaned to a halt with shouts of “woah!” and “Steady now!” The man sitting in the front seemed to hold reins of some kind, his arms were outstretched, but attached to nothing. He nodded down to her and she lifted a hand in greeting back to him. Professor Fig, the kindly old man that had been checking in with her the last month waved from the window and opened the door, bounding down the step and into the street.

“Haven’t kept you waiting long, have I?” he asked.

“Not at all professor,” she answered. “I’m just surprised to see no one out and about this evening. It’s not that chilly out.”

“Yes, well,” he hedged. “Are these your things?” He gestured to the two trunks I had beside me.

“Yes sir,” she replied. *Did he do some kind of magic to keep people away?*

“I’ll get them loaded. I’m expecting another passenger, an old friend of mine who wrote to me in some distress. Something’s on his mind for sure. You don’t mind me meeting him here, do you?”

“Not at all!” she assured him. “I’ve seen no sign of of anyone though...” She looked up and down the streets. Empty.

He chuckled. “Not to worry, he’ll be along. Let me secure your trunks.” He got his wand out from his coat and levitated the trunks to the back of the carriage, and another wave secured them with a rope.

*Now you see, that’s useful magic instead of just destructive magic. That’s the sort of thing I want to be learning.*

“It’s a pity we didn’t have a bit more time to spend on spell-casting,” he remarked, coming back over to me.

*You have no idea. Had you given me instructions for more than my handful of spells I would have spent ‘months’ mastering them, and hungered for more. After all, I can do magic! But no, just the shield charm and a spell to stun people? Why? Why not repairing or healing? Finding lost things? Telling truth from lies? You know, something useful? Oh well, plenty of ‘time’ for that going forward.*

He went on. “I presume you’ve been practicing the spells we worked on?”

“I have, professor,” she assured him, trying hard not to roll her eyes. *He doesn’t know I spent more than two months of personal time mastering them. No sense in tipping my hand if I don’t know how he’ll react. Even in the magical world, an ability like that might be a bit unsettling to people.*

“Good, good. You know, I’m quite sure I’ve never seen anyone take so quickly to a second-hand wand. You’ll be a force to be reckoned with when you get your own.” He winked.

*Yes. Quickly being a relative term here. And does it really matter that someone used this wand before me? It doesn’t seem like it would. Still-* “Thank you, Professor Fig. I appreciate your working with me before the term begi-”

There was a crack and a startled looking man appeared out of nowhere, looking away from the pair. Aerith grabbed her wand out as he looked around but Fig just put his hand on it and pushed it

down. The man got around to turning around and brightened. He was wearing mostly browns with a red bow tie (so cool!) and was wearing glasses. Had a rather strange beard she thought, but he seemed likable enough. "Oh! Eleazar!" he shouted, as if we hadn't seen and heard his strange arrival.

*Can wizards move through space in an instant? He wasn't just invisible to the eye just then, he appeared out of nowhere! That seems quite useful.*

"George!" Eleazar greeted the man warmly. "Glad my rather cryptic description of our location did not thwart your finding us."

"I've Apparated to more vaguely defined destinations than this," he bragged.

*Wait, what? Okay, apparently what he did is called Apparating, fine. But he can go to places he's not familiar with? How does that work? Could I Apparate to the nearest large pile of unattended gold? The nearest hunky boy? How does he know even what direction to travel in I mean these streets all look pretty similar at night.*

He went on. "Though, I confess I may have miscalculated slightly on my first try. Gave quite the fright to some theatre-goers in the West End." He laughed in a way that wasn't even slightly creepy, no wait it was.

"It's been much too long-" Eleazar started to say, but Aerith was blinking and frowning.

"Hold on," she interrupted. "Do you mean to say you did that appearing trick where *non-magical* people could see you?" she demanded of the new arrival. (Having found the wizard term "muggle" to be fairly offensive and nonsensical she was determined not to use it unless absolutely necessary.)

"Ah, yes, why?" he asked, confused.

"If I'm remembering correctly," *and I know I am, I read those books over and over the last 'two months'* "isn't that a crime in the magical world? Or did you... What was the term? Something to do with memory..."

"Obliviate," Professor Fig provided. "The memory charm. Yes, she does have the right of it old friend. You did Obliviate them afterwards, didn't you? And then found a quiet place to Apparate from out of sight?"

"Er..." He looked uncomfortable, eyes downcast.

"I see," she announced. "So the law is fairly lax, then? I ask just for my own education, not that I consider myself a rule breaker," *without a recent point in time to go back to, any way*, "but it would be nice to know which laws the ministry is more of a stickler about."

"They are rather strict about that one," Eleazar assured me, scowling at his friend. "He really should have done the right thing, no matter how much of a hurry he was in. I hope he hasn't given you the wrong impression about our laws, they are fairly strict, for our own protection."

"I seem to have made a rather bad first impression, haven't I?" George muttered. "Sorry about that. I've rather embarrassed myself in front of your... student?"

"Yes, George, this is Aerith. Aerith, George. She'll be starting Hogwarts a bit late, apparently she was passed over until just now. I'm escorting her to the castle rather than making her go to the station and ride the train there. Could be lots of uncomfortable questions raised that way."

"Never much liked trains myself," George admitted. "Big, noisy, smelly things. In any case, congratulations. It's the finest school of magic anywhere! Strange to be admitted so late but you'll get the hang of it, I'm sure."

"Well, if all the professors are like the one I've had so far, I shouldn't have anything to worry about," I told him.

"That's the spirit."

"We should actually get going," Eleazar decided, as the man at the front of the carriage was looking at his pocket watch impatiently and rather pointedly, as if he had been doing it for some time and hoping one of us would notice. "You're welcome to come with us if you don't mind being dragged back to the school again."

“Not at all,” George assured him. “Lead the way!”

Aerith was about to climb aboard when it struck her just what she was climbing into. A wooden box, pulled by invisible *some things*, and while such things might be commonplace among wizards, they were not where she was concerned. She put a hand up and begged a moment, looking around at the street one last time. Something “clicked” and she knew she could return to this moment should something happen on the way to school. “Right then, let’s be on our way,” she announced.

They climbed aboard the carriage and it took off into the sky, rather more smoothly than she expected. *Does it have some kind of magic on it to make the ride smoother?*

“Now, as to the purpose of my letter,” George began. He pulled out a newspaper with a *moving picture* on the front of it, making her stare. *The books I had been given didn’t have anything like that in their pages!* Looking over the headline it made reference to some kind of rebellion by “goblins” whatever those were, presumably the pointed eared, bald, not exactly human looking fellow was one. The two men then carried on a conversation that pretty much went over her head, but she learned a few things. The ministry wasn’t doing much about it yet as they didn’t know how dangerous this goblin, Ranrok, was. George believed significantly. Eleazar had been married to a woman named Miriam, who was now dead. This woman had been doing some kind of research it seemed, because George had been sent a strange metal container by her right before she died.

*Why did she send this container to George, and not her own husband? she wondered. Because he works in the ministry? Where was he during this time? This must have happened just recently. He never mentioned her, were they separated? Still, pretty awful to assign him to me so soon after such a great loss. Though I suppose it’s possible this was to shake him out of a spiral of grief?*

The two were exclaiming over it and wondering what could be inside when she noticed something strange about the container. It was shining, as though sunlight was glinting off it, but they were flying through clouds so that was impossible.

“Is that light around it from your efforts to open it?” she asked.

“Light? What light?” Elaezar asked, turning it this way and that.

“There’s no light,” George assured us.

“There is a silvery light coming from that symbol,” she assured them, pointing right at it.

“Are you sure about that? Maybe it’s just the angle it’s at, look at it straight on,” Elaezar decided, offering it to her. She took the cylinder gingerly in both hands, but it was solidly built and was about to give it a shake when the glow vanished and the doors popped open.

“I tried everything I knew to get that to open,” protested George. “And it just opens for you at a touch? How is that fair?”

“So it seems,” she replied, tipping it to show the contents. It seemed like a silver key. A very large, silver key of a type she had never seen before. Keys were of course typically as small as possible because a person might need to carry several or even a dozen of them at once. This one was thick, with an almost flame looking design at one end, and a massive... key part, whatever that was called, at the other. It was easily big enough to comfortably hold in the hand and stab someone with the design part. Actually, looking at the design on the outer case and the key showed them to be quite similar.

“Well that seems like a-”

But George never got to finish his thought as the back half of the carriage simply ripped away, causing the both of us to jump back and hold on for dear life. *There go my bags*, she thought. Then it registered to her what exactly had caused the carriage to be bisected, there was an enormous *dragon* flapping away after them! The piece of the carriage he had in his mouth was crushed in an instant and spat out, and he turned his attention to them. *I didn’t get any warning because it was George that died, not me. Not that I would have had a chance to do anything in this cramped space. Still, what do I have these powers for if not this exact situation?* She waved to the dragon. “Byeeeeeee.”

“What are you-” Elaezar wondered, looking pale as a ghost and looking at Aerith like she had lost her mind.

She blinked, about to get into the carriage, and thanking her past self for being so obsessed with creating points in time she could easily go back to. She had never needed one quite *that* quickly but still. *Right, calm down. Nothing happened, you’ve just been standing here talking. No dragons for us, no sir. Wow that was scary.* “On second thought, sirs,” she wondered aloud, coming up with a story that might work, “that way of simply wishing yourself from place to place. What did you call it?”

“Apparating,” Elaezar told me.

“Yes, that! Can you take others with you?”

“I suppose,” George, who was still alive and would never know, if she could help it, how he died in about five minutes, said. “It’s not exactly a pleasant sensation.”

“Still,” she waved that off. “We *could* fly about in a noisy and somewhat uncomfortable carriage for *hours*... No offense,” she said up to the man at the front.

“None taken,” he assured her, looking like he was taking at least some anyway.

“Or simply go to the castle directly and have a nice cup of tea by a fire someplace. I’m sure my bags are in good hands, if you can’t bring them too. But I for one would love to experience the way a *real* wizard travels about the world.” *Come on, go for it! Let me save your life!*

“Can’t Apparate into Hogwarts,” Elaezar told her with a shake of his head. “Or out, for that matter.”

“But we could go to the village,” George mused. “Just outside it, in fact, walk the rest of the way to the three broomsticks. A bit of a chat and then it’s up to the school you go! Yes, capital idea I must say.”

“I don’t mind walking!” she hastened to assure them. *Though these shoes aren’t exactly the best for that sort of thing. I’ll manage, and it’s better than being chomped by a dragon. What was that, anyway? A random attack? Must have been, if it was after the container it wouldn’t have ripped the thing in half. What if George had still been holding it?*

“I suppose I don’t either,” George admitted. “It would save us some time, wouldn’t it. And let you see the village a bit before school starts. Yes, let’s just do that old bean!”

“I don’t see any harm in it,” Elaezar agreed. “We’ll get the bags when the carriage arrives if that’s all right with you,” he shouted to the man.

“Very well.” He gave his invisible reins a shake and the carriage was off.

*Please, don’t you die either. But the dragon took the back half of the carriage so he could just land and be fine after that. Or just Apparate himself. Bye clothing, school things I never got to use. Still, try to explain it’s about to be attacked by a dragon and so you need to carry them around now. That should go over well.*

“Why so glum?” George asked, offering his arm. “This was your idea after all.”

“Oh don’t mind me,” she tittered, taking it. “Just thinking about what could have been, that’s all. Shall we?”

“Let’s go.” There was a very unpleasant moment of being squashed but it passed quickly, and we were overlooking a small village.

“Welcome to Hogsmede,” Professor Fig told me. “Ah, there’s the road we’re not far. This way.”

She glanced up at the sky. *No dragons here. Thank goodness.*

At the table the men ordered for her, making her sigh a bit, *but at the same time there could be magical drinks I had no idea existed.* After they were brought George got out his wand and put some sort of charm around the booth, and nodded to himself.

“Silencing charm?” Elaezar asked. “Whatever for?”

“This is a rather sensitive topic,” he began.

"I could go to another table," Aerith offered.

"Oh dear me girl, I don't mean it like that. If Alaezar vouches for you, I'm all for letting you stay."

"Aerith," she reminded him.

"Yes, Aerith. Please, you're welcome to stay. Who knows, maybe a fresh set of eyes will see something we don't!" He laughed at his little joke but it was all too likely. *Yes, a glow around a container with a key in it, that you can't open but apparently just a single touch from me does. The question is, do I actually open it this time? I don't think my opening it prompted that dragon attack in any way but this is a world of magic, can I rule anything out? What if the key comes with a guardian? It just so happened to be summoned outside, rather than in the carriage with us? Still, I have brought them this far and I am intrigued by this odd case. Maybe it's not me, it's my being a girl that allows it to open? No, he said Miriam had it in her possession before sending it to him, so it can't be that. I guess just to be safe...* She looked around, fixing the booth and the surrounding area into her sense of time and allowing her previous efforts to fade away. Meanwhile both men exclaimed over it, and yes the glow was still there to her eyes. *Perhaps giving them a 'solution' while not exactly letting on it's me the container is responding to? I see a way to make that happen.* "Have you tried twisting the knobs?" she asked innocently.

"Twisting the knobs?" both men asked, looking at her like they had forgotten she was there. *Of course they did, I'm a girl.*

"Yes, the little knobs on the ends. Here, may I?"

With a shrug Professor Fig handed it over and she pretended to grasp it by the balls on either end, "twisting" them with a flourish. As before the light around the thing changed at her touch and the doors popped open, revealing the silver looking key inside.

"Well, leave it to the young I suppose!" George chortled. "Well done."

"Here you are," she handed the thing back to the professor. *But what does it mean, that it does open at my touch? Is it some ability of mine, like being able to go back, that I just have never had the opportunity to see in action?*

"A key? How curious. What sort of lock must this fit into to be so large?"

"Indeed, look at the size of it," George agreed. "How would you even lift it into place?"

Aerith held back a snicker. *Isn't that my line?* "You did say your wife was studying some kind of magic somewhere, right? Perhaps we should go there to find the door?" she suggested.

"When did I say that?" Professor Fig asked.

"What?" She froze. *Sloppy, Aerith, very sloppy. Don't bring up things you heard in a previous time, isn't that the rule? I must still be shaken from that dragon attack. I do hope the coachman gets away...* "Just a moment ago, didn't you?" she blustered. "You must have, how would I have known otherwise?"

"I suppose I must have," he admitted. "Now that we know the trick of opening it I suppose we can take it back to the school for study. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, George, even if I have no idea what it means." He went to go close it up, and she almost raised a hand to stop him and ask if she could see the key. But she glanced over at George.

*That guy died because of this before. Let's allow him to leave this place alive. Professor Fig won't be able to get it open without my help, I can reveal privately the fact I saw some kind of light shining from this. The sooner we get it behind the walls of the castle and away from him the better. Let's not draw any attention to it, or more attention to me after my little slip up.*

"Not at all, Eleazar. I hope you discover its meaning. Send me an owl when you do, and I'll keep working on the ministry to take Ranrok more seriously."

"I appreciate that, old friend." The two rose and shook hands, and Professor Fig turned to me. "How about we get you to that feast?"

## Chapter 2

This place is a madhouse  
When: Twenty minutes later  
Where: Hogwarts castle

Aerith got a lot of strange looks as she joined the first year students who were waiting to be let into the great hall for the sorting ceremony and welcome feast. Mostly because she towered over them, being several years older. She parted ways with Professor Fig, who looked annoyed to not be diving in the key right away but he said he would find her tomorrow and good luck with the sorting. *Good luck? What, can we be kicked out if we don't fit into a house or something?* They were standing outside the doors until they were announced, in a large chamber right outside where wonderful smells of food were coming from. Still, looking the place over it seemed welcoming enough, with many portraits, tapestries, and suits of armor lining the otherwise bare, stone walls. No one spoke, all the kids there looked pretty nervous honestly, but we didn't have to wait long. They trooped into the dining hall and waited until their names were called, one by one, where a talking hat of all things was placed upon their heads and called out what "house" they would be sorted into. She wondered what it would make of her and it did actually realize it was dealing with someone special.

"You're a bit older than the others," she heard a voice say as the hat was placed on her head. Time seemed to slow, as though she had entered a dream state, and somehow she knew that she could talk back and not be heard by anyone else. She wasn't concerned, *time and I are old friends*, not that she wanted to go back to the three broomsticks and have the whole walk here to take again.

"You're probably not the first, uh, person that's going to say that to me," she told it. "I hope it's not going to cause any problems for you."

"Not at all," it assured her. "Your mind is as clear to me as anyone else's. But I wasn't exactly talking physical age, if you take my meaning."

"Ah. You can tell that, can you?"

"Indeed I can. Flashing back and forth through time... How extraordinary."

"Have you ever seen anyone else with this ability?"

"Ah ah ah, you wouldn't want me telling anyone about your ability would you? So naturally I can't answer that question."

"Even in a general sense? I'm not asking you to name any names."

"Even so."

"Fine. I suppose you have a point. I won't press you." *What would I even do, to threaten a hat? I don't think so.* "What happens now?"

"Now, as my choice is quite clear, I say 'Ravenclaw!'"

She snapped back into real time to mixed applause, and the hat was whisked off her head. She joined her fellow Ravenclaw students at their table to more odd looks, and tried not to sigh. The ceremony continued, with the headmaster telling them Quidditch had been canceled. As she had no idea what that was she didn't care that much, but the others seemed to be quite upset by it. Then they were dismissed, and one older girl stood and announced they should all follow her. There seemed to be some grumbling but the boys and girls sorted themselves and they all took their places at her back. She answered the riddle to open the door to "our" section of the castle and they climbed some more stairs (oh my goodness, there were so many stairs in this place!) and led us, of all things, to a bathroom. She

could use one by that point, but that wasn't why they were there. She introduced herself as Falina, our Head Girl, and said we should come to her with any problems, concerns, or issues we may have at any time.

"I have your names here from our head of house," said Falina, holding up a list. "So we can get started straight away. For you first years- This is our bathroom. Our *only* bathroom. Our dorm rooms are up a few more flights of stairs, so you will be coming down here first thing in the morning. You will find there are not many total bathrooms in the castle and if you take a look around and put together what I've told you with what you're seeing in front of you, you'll come to the heart of the problem. I'll wait."

The older students had a mix of expressions as she looked around, ranging from resignation to expectation. The younger students were looking around curiously. Aerith tipped open one of the stall doors and was pleased to find a modern looking toilet.

"What a relief," she breathed. "Were these installed recently? They look ancient." And they did. The brass pipes connecting the water tank above the bowl was green with age and the doors looked scuffed and in need of a good painting.

"They are ancient," Falina told her with a nod. "As far as I know they were installed when the castle was built. Certainly my mother never told me of any renovations and I've never seen any."

"Wait though, the castle was built ages ago!" one other girl blurted.

"About 990 AD I think," said an older girl.

"Wait, this place has had these sorts of toilets for almost a thousand years?" Aeirth exclaimed. "But they're only gaining in popularity in what you would call the non-magical world."

"Why do you think most wizards consider muggles to be so backwards?" one girl said. "They're absolutely helpless!"

"But someone could have clued us in- them- in. A thousand years?"

Most people shrugged or shook their heads. "Not our job to give them any help. They would just as soon burn us at the stake than help us, after all," said one girl, and everyone nodded. "Can you imagine the looks on their faces if we showed them flush toilets a thousand years ago? May as well do magic for them, in that case."

*Yes, I suppose that's true...*

"Anyway," Falina interrupted. "Let's get this over with, I don't want to be in this bathroom all night. Has anyone figured out the problem yet?" The first years went back to thinking about it, and the quicker ones started to get horrified look on their faces. "I see some of you have. Well, what about our new fifth-year, and I'll want to hear that story later by the way. Do you see the problem?"

She took a second and looked around. Several stalls, sinks. Crowded into the room were about two hundred kids leaving barely any room to even move... "Oh no! You said this was the *only* bathroom anywhere near here!"

"Exactly. And as classes all start at the same time..." She trailed off.

"There's going to be a huge rush at the same time every morning and evening!" Aerith finished.

"Correct." She agreed with a savage nod of her head. "So, I don't know how the other houses do it but *we*," and she said "we" with more than a trace of pride, "are *Ravenclaws*. We do things the smart way. As you can see I have a schedule here, in fifteen minute blocks for both a sink and a toilet for the morning and evening shifts, if you will. Line up by grade, sorry first years you're in the back. The way it works is, those that are early risers get up, take care of things, and go down to breakfast. They can do homework they didn't finish the night before, and socialize in the common room. Later risers, having done their homework and such the night before get up later and just make it to class. If everything goes smoothly. Everything *will* go smoothly. If you miss your time slot you get to find another bathroom elsewhere in the castle or I guess share a sink or toilet. If you want to make a deal and trade time with someone, it's cleared with me first. This," she tapped the schedule, "is the law around here. No pushing, no shoving, no fighting. This is *essential* to get us *all* to class on time, and is

a tradition dating back hundreds of years. We have made it work before and it will work again. Is that clear?" She looked around at us. They grumbled about it, the first years, but got in line at the back. Aerith joined them.

"Hold on, you're fifth year!" Falina protested, checking her list. "Even if you have just joined the school-"

"But it's my first year *here*. It's not fair if I stand with the other fifth years, who once stood where I am now with the firsts! I'll work my way up to be with the third years by the time it's my last year here."

"Really?" she asked, clearly not expecting this answer. She looked me up and down. "That's... Oh. As you please then, clearly I've- never mind."

"That's okay," she assured her. A moment standing in line was really all she could take at that point. "Look I'll get in the back but it's been hours so..." She headed into a stall to take care of some things, washed her hands, and joined the line again. It looked like the line had moved to the sixth years, so it was going pretty quickly.

"Everything come out all right?" Falina joked, coming over to stand with her.

"Just fine, thanks," she answered somewhat sarcastically. "Why is there only one bathroom around here anyway?"

"Wait until you see how packed in we are in the rooms," she cautioned with a shake of her head. "It's almost to the point where we'll need to be two to a bed. Near as I can figure it, the founders, in their so called wisdom, didn't plan for there being more wizards being born a thousand years from building the castle as there were in their time. But here we are; we have one bathroom and a criminally small amount of dorm rooms to sleep in."

"But there's still so few of us!" she protested. "Two hundred total Ravenclaws only equals about twenty five new people per year!"

"Yeah, imagine what it would have been like at the beginning. Maybe five? And yet *muggles* still outnumber us ten thousand to one. It's crazy."

"If that's true, why this gigantic castle?"

"Ego?"

She laughed. "You're probably right, there. I suppose if I could build a whole castle with magic I would make it as big as possible too."

"For sure!" She joined me in laughing. "What's your story then?" she asked. "Are you transferring from another magical school?"

She shook my head. "No, apparently I was just passed over for some reason. But whoever oversees that process finally caught up with me, I showed I can do magic and got a temporary wand, and here I am. That must happen sometimes, right?"

"Not that I've ever heard of."

"First time for everything I guess."

"So you're starting learning magic from scratch?" Her eyes widened.

"I got a little tutoring but yeah, basically. It's going to be awful trying to catch up."

"I'll say. You need anything, you feel you're starting to slip or you want some tutoring come to me right away. I know we Ravenclaws are big on self sufficiency and trying to solve our own problems and yes I'm looking at you Terra but don't fall into that trap."

"Come to any one of us," spoke up another girl. "We're here for you... Uh..."

"Aerith."

"Aerith, then." The girl went on, looking the smaller kids over. "That goes for you other first years too. Don't hesitate to speak up okay? We witches have to stick together. It's a man's world out there we need every advantage we can get."

"Thank you," she told them. *What a great bunch!*

Aerith finally made her way back up to the dorm rooms where she found her trunks waiting for her. The room was indeed small, but cozy, and there were three beds and five other girls unpacking their stuff. She struggled with the math a second but realized they were beds on top of beds, connected by a small ladder. *That's not really ideal, is it? Still, to see my trunks again...* "Huh," she managed, looking at them.

"Is everything not in order?" Falina asked, looking concerned. "The house elves are usually pretty good about that sort of thing."

"I honestly didn't expect to see them..." *But I can't exactly explain to you why. So the dragon didn't attack that carriage, why? Because George wasn't there? Was he the target all along? He must have been, no one knows me around here. But that means someone was watching us, it wasn't just that they knew what carriage we were on, they watched it take off. As we didn't get on it "this time" the dragon wasn't dispatched and the attack didn't happen. Crazy.*

"Was your driver that shady looking? Wait, how did you get here then?"

"Apparated. I wanted to see what it was like so I requested it." *And to, you know, avoid dying.*

"Nice! I've only traveled by floo. I should take the Apparation course, honestly. I'm old enough, finally."

*Floo?* "It seems handy, if a bit inexact."

"Yeah. Want help unpacking?"

"Oh you don't have to do that!"

"Don't want me to see your contraband, eh? I get it. Just because I'm Head Girl now everyone will be seeing me as the enemy. It's too bad." She shook her head but her expression was one of only mock resignation. Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

"What? No! It's just you're being so nice to me."

"You impressed me, and as Head Girl how often do I get to greet someone closer to my own age but who is still starting out? I remember how lonely and frankly terrified I was starting this school. Leaving home at that age? And I knew it was coming, being in a magic using family. It must be much worse for you."

"You have no idea. Well, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

We opened the trunks up and started putting things away.

"So what's your impression so far?" she asked. "Of all this, I mean?" She gestured to everything and nothing all at once.

"It's so overwhelming," she answered honestly. "I'm not even really processing it, just going where people tell me to go. It'll hit me tomorrow I'm sure. But there is one thing..."

"What's that?" She turned to face me.

"How to say it... I noticed there's a fair number of, uh, colored students here as well. Does Hogwarts really accept them?"

She sighed. "Official school policy is, you can do magic, you're welcome here. But I see where you're coming from. I'm used to it by now but it was odd, seeing coloreds just walking around in robes like everyone else. And it makes a certain amount of sense when you think about it. They aren't *goblins*, for Merlin's sake. Can you even imagine having little goblins stinking up the halls here? Yuck! House elves are bad enough, at least they have the decency to stay out of sight most of the time."

*The who now? That's the second time she's mentioned them.*

"Most of us stay away from them, but they're nice enough. I mean they're not *muggles*, are they? Don't go treating them like servants or anything and you'll be fine."

*I see. So "officially" wizards aren't prejudiced against other wizards, despite appearances. But she's not exactly happy about them being here either, that much is clear, despite them being wizards. In the end though, it's much more common for wizards to show prejudice towards other races, such as goblins and elves. If I am to take this one girl's musings on the subject as the baseline anyway, and*

*expect some are more or less tolerant of our differences. I wonder what that attitude says about us, on the whole, as a species? Something profound I'm sure but I'm too tired at the moment to think what it could be. Well, if one talks to me I'll try to treat them like I would anyone else. I mean, how do I feel when I'm brushed off just for being a girl? Doesn't seem right to put that same feeling on someone else because of their skin color.* "That sounds fair enough," she told her. "Thank you for the assessment."

"Sure thing. Better to have the right idea right from the start than make a fool of yourself later. I'll let you get some sleep, I'm sure you'll have a busy day tomorrow. It's Saturday so no classes, but I'm sure you'll want to see the whole castle, get a sense of where things are."

"It's probably a three hour tour!" she joked.

"Depends on how fast you can recover from going up and down all the stairs we have here. You should see the size of my calves, I'll never snag a husband they're so huge!" She pulled up her skirts, turning her legs this way and that. We laughed, but she sobered. "I'm not kidding, there's a lot of stairs. Honestly, could the founders have not put in some magical lifts or something? Though you can use the Floo network... I hate those stupid statue things they attached to it though. Oh, I hate them so much... You will too!"

*There's that word again.*

"Have a good night!"

"Thanks, you too. And I mean it, thanks for everything."

"Oh, I almost forgot!" She turned to the bed and showed me how to set the alarm that was magically built into it. "Better get used to getting up and getting ready to get your time slot in the bathroom. In and out, as they say."

"I'll try my best."

"Great. See you around, Aerith!"

"See you, Falina."

"Finally, she's gone," said one of the other girls in the room. "I'm Tina, by the way. Are you a top or a bottom?"

"Uh, excuse me?"

"Bunk. Top or bottom bunk?"

"Oh! I'll take what's left... I mean I'm coming in so late and you girls must have known each other forever." *Kind of jealous, sort of thing?*

"We drew straws, or basically I did and lost. So you won the pick. Congratulations."

"Thanks? I guess... Bottom?"

"Okay, then this one is yours." She pointed out what was to be my bed for the foreseeable future. "Want to do introductions now or are you wiped out?"

"Actually I need to do a diary entry for today so I hope I can go a little longer. Let's get introduced now."

"Good. We are going to be living fairly close together from now on," Tina cautioned. Everyone around the room introduced themselves, I was going to be living with a Jo, a Sabrina, an Elle, and a Mary.

"She wasn't kidding about the crowded rooms, I guess!"

"No she was not," Elle agreed. "Not that some would mind doubling up." She poked Mary.

"Quit it, I was just cold that's all!" She slapped Elle's hand away playfully.

"Uh huh."

"We've been roommates forever, don't let them get to you," Jo told me. "Welcome to the group." She held out her hand for me to shake, which I did.

"Sorry to disrupt things," I told them honestly. "It can't be easy, having a new person dumped on you like this."

“Oh no, it’s fine,” everyone hastened to assure me. “It was unfair of us to have *allllll* this extra space because it happened there weren’t enough students to completely fill this last room,” Tina announced, throwing her hands wide and smacking both Elle and Sabrina in the face. They playfully shoved each other but with us all standing there it wasn’t like they could really go anywhere.

*Seems like they really did become good friends.* “I’ll try not to get in the way,” I promised. *But where will I really fit in?*

“Good!” announced Jo. She looked at me, head bobbing left and right. The others were regarding me seriously as well, like they were trying to decide if they should eat me or not.

*I need an adult.* “What?”

“You’re cool, right?”

“What?”

“I mean, if, and this is just a theoretical, we had a sort of tradition where we, that is the five of us, went for a swim the first night back and we, perhaps, invited you along would you tell on us?”

“Are we allowed in the halls?” she asked, pretty sure they weren’t.

“Eh, no one really cares I guess? Honestly, they would need two dozen people on constant patrol in the halls to catch us. The castle as a whole is pretty empty after sundown.”

“The perks of having this huge place, and most people go to their common rooms after dark,” agreed Tina. “It’s mostly empty, most of the time.”

“I do like swimming,” I told them. “And I’d go with you, but I didn’t pack any kind of swimming costume.”

“Neither did we,” said Sabrina with a huge grin, wiggling her eyebrows.

## Chapter 3

Diary page 1

Dear Diary,

I am freaking out!

I've been holding it together by trying not to think about it, but now that I'm back from swimming with the others (more on that later) and they all went to bed I can't stop shaking. There. Was. A. Dragon. Okay, dragons are real I guess? What else big and scary am I going to learn is real in the next few weeks at this school? And how many of those big scary things are going to try killing me?

To Do: Buy small notebook to keep with you at all times. Write down spells you learn and go through it every day. As you learn more and more spells it'll be harder and harder to keep track of them all by memory. If you come under attack by something again you need to remember right away what spells you know so review them all the time. You may not always be able to get away as you did this time, or you may want to stay and fight for some reason.

I made some offhand comments to the others and it seems dragon attacks are very rare, mostly because dragons are vary rare. It's illegal to hatch them, for obvious reasons, but at the same time some are kept around so the species doesn't go extinct. That coupled with the fact our carriage didn't get attacked when we weren't on it means someone didn't want that key to be taken out of the case. A personal grudge against Professor Fig or his friend George wouldn't warrant sending a dragon, would it? What would have happened if I couldn't 'go back?' Would I have fallen to my death? Could Professor Fig have saved both of us somehow? I guess if he could Apparate us, but we were moving pretty fast, we would have still slammed into the ground at the speed we were going, right? What does that key represent that someone went to such lengths to see it destroyed? Especially by a goblin, as that's who they were talking about right before the dragon attacked.

Oh dear, I just had a thought. If one of my new roommates gets a hold of you and reads this they're going to think I'm nuts. With all my talk of 'going back' and such.

To Do: Look into locking charms or some other spell to only show the contents of a diary to the owner. Meanwhile try to hide you very well. This is such a small room though...

Otherwise life is going just fine. I'm at my new school, and everyone seems nice. Super nice. A little too nice, if you ask me.

To Do: Look into spells that can be cast over a wide area that can influence people, could there be a "be nice to people" spell on the castle?

I got invited by my roommates to go swimming, a little ritual of theirs on the first day it seems. I kept waiting for them to rush off with my clothes, leaving me to have to make my way through this

huge castle naked and wet back to the dorm. But it never happened. It would have been fine, I would have either gone back and refused the offer or just walked back. They were right about the halls being empty at night. Strange, one could just wander as much as they wanted around here. They, and everyone else around here seems super nice, and welcoming.

By the way, moonlight swims in the lake? *Amazing*. Will have to go again before the water gets too cold.

So since I wrote to you last I have almost been killed, been wished from London to Scotland in the blink of an eye, gone to a feast, met a talking hat, got sorted into Ravenclaw, met the Head Girl who seems quite put together, and my new roommates. Or I guess as they didn't prank me, my new friends. Odd how that worked out, isn't it? The castle is huge, we only have one bathroom for all of us, and there are about a million stairs you have to use to get anywhere.

Looking forward to tomorrow. I hope I can get some sleep.

## Chapter 4

Taking my first steps, and then more steps, and then more steps

When: The next day

Where: Hogwarts castle

Aerith awoke with a start, looking up into the face of her bunkmate, Tina.

“Morning sleepyhead,” she greeted Aerith. She pulled her hand back, apparently having shaken her awake.

“Aw, she woke up. No tickling!” Mary pouted. “That’s the rule in this room, you know. You don’t get up, you get tickled.”

*Huh, probably it was you who instituted that rule?*

“Come on, your spot in the bathroom is coming up. Believe me when I say you don’t want to miss it.”

“Right you are,” she agreed.

Satisfied she would get up, Tina nodded and left the room with a “I’ll wait for you at breakfast, you can come sit with us.”

“Thanks,” Aerith called after her. She got up, did her morning ritual of concentrating on her surroundings to replace yesterday’s ‘go back’ slot, and gathered up her things to be on time to the bathroom.

*I’m going to be going back to this point a lot after all. On second thought, maybe get dressed and ready first, then replace that one with a new one? I don’t want to have to brush my teeth twenty times. I expect I’ll want to practice any spells I learn today, then go back and practice them again and again. Then maybe learn different ones, and practice them. Learn how to get around the school, all that sort of stuff.* Luckily she couldn’t get lost on the way there, though the main hall was a bit trickier and she had to ask directions several times. With that taken care of and breakfast eaten, the girls discussed what they were going to do today. This was interrupted by a professor coming over to where they were seated.

“Ah, Aerith, there you are, exactly as Professor Fig described you,” she began. “That long hair of yours is distinctive, for some reason not many witches wear it that way. Probably because of flying, now that I think about it.”

“Good morning Professor Weasley!” the other girls chorused, then giggled to each other.

“Yes, hello girls. Ah, I see, you were paired up with them to be roommates? Pity about what happened to- well never mind.”

“Yes professor,” Aerith answered.

“There are worse- anyway. I’m afraid I must steal her away from you for the moment girls.”

“Awww!”

“But professor,” Tina protested. “There’s just so much to do and show her today! We can’t waste a minute. After we come up with a plan and a suitable checklist of course.”

“You and your checklists,” Mary teased.

“What? It’s a good way to see what you need to do and how much you’ve accomplished!”

“Humm, I suppose this does relate, and it’s no secret. Very well, you may stay girls. As for you, Aerith, I have something for you. All the professors worked on it, and honestly I think it came out very

well. Here you are.” She handed Aerith a new looking book with an H on the front of it, and Aerith noticed it was secured with a clasp.

*A new diary? Couldn't be, how would they know I needed one? Unless they somehow already read my old one??????*

“This is what we are affectionately calling the field guide,” Professor Weasley explained. “It will help you in exploring the area, keeping track of your progress, and get around both the castle and the surrounding grounds.”

“Why thank you!” Aerith said surprised. “That sounds like an awful lot of work to have gone through just for me. I shall write a letter of thanks this evening, if you don't mind making sure everyone that took part gets to read it.” *I'm not writing a dozen letters, after all. I wonder if there's magic to duplicate text? Must be, to make the newspapers?*

“That would be a sweet gesture but not really necessary,” Professor Weasley assured her.

*I'm still going to do it.*

“Now, open it up and we'll see if it works as advertised.”

*Works?* Aerith hesitantly undid the clasp and as she cracked the pages open, she was met with a flurry of escaping pages, shrieking and throwing the book away from her in complete shock. Pages continued to erupt from the book, flying in every which way, forcing her to cover her head with her arms so as to not be paper cut to death. Finally the eruption seemed to stop and she hesitantly opened one eye. “Is it over? What happened?” She put her arms down. “I'm sorry, I just don't know what went wrong!”

“Probably should have given you a bit of warning about that,” Professor Weasley mused to herself. “Well, what's done is done.”

“You should have seen your face!” Sabrina told her, starting to laugh. “That was hilarious.”

“Are you all right?” Jo asked, trying not to laugh herself. “That was a cruel joke to play, what, was it Professor Ronen's idea? Honestly, that you would go along with such a thing professor. I'm surprised at you.” She patted Aerith's arm gently. “There, there, it's over now, it's just a book again. With, less pages... I guess.”

“Ah, yes, perhaps a bit over the top I agree. But it does serve a purpose. Those pages will now be found all around Hogwarts and the surrounding area. Most will be invisible so you will need to learn the Revelio spell to reveal them. They will then go back into the book and you can read up on whatever the page was near at that time.”

Sabrina and the others stopped laughing, staring at Professor Weasley as though she had grown a second head.

“I'm sorry, I must have misheard you,” Jo finally spoke up. “You went through a whole lot of trouble to create a book with information on various sites in the local area and rather than simply allow Aerith to *read* that book, at her own pace, you instead enchanted the pages to fly away, become invisible, and now she has to go track them down? Instead of, I don't know, her homework and other studies to catch up on four years of school that she missed?”

“Yes,” Professor Weasley answered slowly.

“I mean I appreciate a good prank as much as anyone,” Sabrina told her, “but that's going too far professor. What exactly do you expect from her? Skipping down the halls casting Revelio every ten steps? Revelio. Revelio. Revelio. Revelio.” She mimed casting with each repetition of the word.

“That's quite enough, Sabrina, we get the point.”

“She'll be a laughingstock,” Mary told her. “Is magic even permitted in the halls now? I'm pretty sure it's not.”

“Oh, yes, that is a bit of a snag isn't it? Strictly speaking it's not. Oh dear,” Professor Weasley admitted, looking troubled.

"I could see another way you could have handled it," Elle spoke up. "Just with a different enchantment. Make the pages blank but if she touched an object with the book that page would be shown and she could read it then."

"Where did you hear about that?" Professor Weasley demanded, her demeanor instantly changing and looking like she was about to pounce.

She gave a little jerk in her seat, not expecting that level of anger in her voice. "What? Hear? I just thought of it!"

Professor Weasley seemed to recall where she was and relaxed again, raising a hand in surrender. "Right, sorry, sorry. It's just, in my time as a curse breaker I was once tracking rumors of just such a book, that could provide information about things if you hit them with it."

"That would be incredibly useful!"

"You would think so. Unfortunately, the rumor was the magic went further than that. It could also show your attributes, like being happy or that a flower was yellow. Those attributes could then be swapped between things, thus making a person yellow and a happy flower."

"That could potentially be the most dangerous object on the planet!" Sabrina gasped.

"Yes, good thing for us they did turn out to just be rumors. But that is neither here nor there. Are you all right, dear?"

"Yes, it just surprised me, that's all," Aerith told her. "So what's left of the book, then?"

"Various maps of the castle and surrounding area. A chapter keeping track of your accomplishments. The book can also store things in its pages as drawings, to be called out at need so you don't need to carry a bunch of stuff around. Most people buy magical, bottomless pouches for that sort of thing, but as we figured you would be carrying the book anyway... It has a to-do list, you'll see when you look into it."

"Oh. Thank you."

"And you say these pages are now just hanging around?" Tina asked.

"Yes, why?"

"Well, I'm not saying it happens *frequently*, mind you, but there are times when others cast Revelio in the halls. What if someone else stumbles on a page and takes it? Then the book will never be complete again!"

"Oh yeah, Revelio really is the best," Sabrina told Aerith. "If you don't know it we can work on that first!"

"Why?"

"It can show you all sorts of things you might want to see, not just invisible stuff. Right through walls; Treasure. Enemies. Plants you might want to harvest. *Boys*."

"What?!"

"Ahem, yes, that use is of course strictly forbidden in the corridors but we honestly can't police it very well," Professor Weasley admitted.

"It's not *that* great," Elle grumbled. "A vague blob at best... Is what I've heard people say about the spell, obviously."

"Obviously," she agreed. "Well, I've delivered the book. Girls, please make sure after you finish teaching her Revelio that she knows how to use the Floo network, find at least one page so you know you can... Oh better work on Accio too as many of the pages are flapping around, visible, and you'll need that spell to grab them."

"That's a tough spell, professor!" protested Jo. "It took me a week to master it!"

"That was last year, right?" Tina asked.

"Forth year spell, yes," Mary agreed. "And you want her to learn it as one of her first spells? Do you even know Wingardium Leviosa yet? That's the spell we learned first in charms class year one."

*Just how far behind my classmates am I?* “No?” Aerith answered. “I only know how to break stuff, the shield charm, and Stupify. Sort of a red light, smashes stuff? I don’t know what the name of the spell is actually, he made me practice it non-verbally so I could use it at will.”

“Wait, why did Professor Fig teach you that particular hex?” Professor Weasley asked.

“Accuracy,” Aerith answered confidently. “He said hitting what you’re aiming at with a spell is a key foundation for all spell-casting.”

“I guess I can’t fault him there,” she admitted. “To get back to your question, Tina, the pages are insubstantial until near the book. We didn’t want people running into them, after all.”

“Oh that’s all right then,” she allowed.

“I shall leave you to it, girls. Aerith, I’m glad you’ve made some friends. Good luck with the field guide, and I shall see you in class.” Everyone said their goodbyes and she turned and walked away. Once out of earshot Jo turned to the others.

“You know, I was all excited about showing Aerith stuff but now that I’ve been *commanded* to do it by a professor, I don’t really feel the same way about it.”

“I hear ya,” said Sabrina, standing up. “Let’s get out of here, the nerve of Professor Weasley, thinking we were this girl’s friends or something.”

“Are we not?” Tina asked, concerned. “I thought we were getting along fine!”

“I’m just joking around, don’t make that face,” Sabrina told Aerith. “Bring your new book and let’s head to a good spot for some Revelio practice. In fact,” she got out her wand and gave it a wave. “Revelio!” She looked around. “Eh, nothing interesting around here. Revelio!” She took two steps and cast it again. “Humm, this is kind of fun. Revelio!”

“Yeah, that’s going to get old fast,” Tina remarked. “What were the professors *thinking?*”

So the girls went outside and put Aerith’s field guide behind a tree, then made her cast Revelio until she said she could “see” it, as a sort of yellow rectangle behind the tree. Then they cast it as people went by on the other side of the wall to see if she could tell how many there were, and then they tracked a page down at a painting, which got sucked back into the book. By that time it was time for lunch, so Aerith simply went back to the beginning of their time practicing and showed she could cast it on her “first” try. *Saving me the whole morning, so I can now work on the next spell I need to learn.*

“There’s no way you’re seeing it already,” Sabrina told her. “Stop lying!”

“I’m not! Look, there’s three people standing and talking through that wall there.”

“We’ll see. Revelio!” She did a double take. “What in the world?”

“She’s right?” Elle asked, surprised.

“Yeah, I see them too. Wow, you’re a fast learner. I guess it’s a pretty easy spell but wow, and you’re sure you’ve never cast that spell before?”

*Not in “this” time, no.* “That was my first time!”

“Well, every so often a showoff come along,” Sabrina allowed. “That can pick up spells really fast. Usually some girl with frizzy hair, and bad teeth too. You’ll be absolute rubbish at everything else so don’t go getting too big a head.”

“I’ll try not to. So about this Accio...”

To avoid a similar situation with Accio Aerith practiced for two hours, overwrote her previous “go back” point and again went until lunch time before going back. As expected it was a difficult spell to master, but she kept at it, losing track of exactly how many times she went back until she finally was able to cast “Accio Field Guide” and have it jump into her hands.

“Not bad, you are quick,” Mary remarked.

“Thank you,” Aerith replied. “I just have good teachers, that’s all. Your suggestions really did help.” *Mostly. But they did help more than they know, and I know they would have stuck with it, helping me on this, their last weekend before classes start. They really are good people.*

“So can we please go have lunch?” Elle pleaded for like the twentieth time from Aerith’s perspective. “I’m starving.”

“Accio lunch!” Aerith joked, waving her wand around.

They all had a good laugh at that and went to go eat.

While discussing what to do that afternoon, and Aerith reminding them about whatever this Floo stuff was, the group got another visit. This time from one Professor Fig, who walked up looking troubled.

“Ah, Aerith, there you are,” he told her. “I may need your help for a moment.”

*Yup, here it is. He didn’t waste any time but then, would I have?* “Of course professor, do you need something floated through the air towards you? I’m able to cast Accio now if so.”

He chuckled at that. “No, it’s about that container my friend gave me. I’ve twisted the balls on that thing every which way but I can’t get it to open. Can you work your magic on it again?”

The girls giggled.

“What did I say?”

“Never mind,” Aerith told him. “Girls, it looks like you’re free of me for a bit while I go help the professor tickle his balls.”

Sabrina burst out laughing and put her head down, pounding a fist on the table. “Tickle. Oh no!”  
*Private joke...*

“Yes, yes, very funny,” Professor Fig admitted, rolling his eyes. “Shall we go?”

“Will you be long?” Tina asked.

*I’ll need to explain why I can open it. May be important.* “Maybe?” she hedged.

“I just need you to open it, I don’t mean to take you away from your new friends,” he protested.

Aerith got up. “It’s a little more complex than you think, professor. Lead the way, I’ll find you somehow when we’re through,” she told the others.

“Look down by the lake, in the, uh, spot we showed you,” Tina told her. “We sometimes hang out there. Or the library, we are Ravenclaws. Or ask a portrait, many hang in different places in the castle for that very reason.”

“We need a charm to point out where a person is,” Aerith mused.

“Hey yeah, let’s go look into that!” Elle announced, perking up.

“Now see what you did?” Jo told her. “Go on, get out of here.”

The professor and Aerith walked to a strange green flame, which he told her how to use, and that got them closer to his office. *So that’s the Floo? Interesting method.*

“You can’t imagine how tedious travel was,” said the statue on the Floo point as they appeared at their destination, “before I invented Floo powder!”

Aerith of course jumped at the voice and looked around, deciding it was the face that was talking. “Is it going to do that every time?” she asked.

“Oh sorry, I tune it out now. Yes, I don’t know what trickster god was the muse of whoever made those Floo Flame statues but they absolutely will not shut up. You use the Floo network twenty times in a day, a statue reminds you of what you just did. It’s very, very, annoying. Come.”

“Right...” *Maybe a silencing charm?*

“But while we walk, why did you say it was more complex than I thought? You weren’t just trying to get away from them, were you?”

“What?! Oh no, they’re great. Very patient, I think we’ll wind up being friends. No, it’s something else. Something about the container you need to know.”

“You didn’t recognize it, did you? Why didn’t you- oh, you didn’t want George to know?”

“Something like that,” she admitted. “It’s hard to explain. You’ll see, at least in part, I promise.”

“Very well, my office is just through here.”

The two went in and there was the container on the desk. Aerith took a deep breath. “You see, I sort of tricked you before with that turning of the balls thing I did. All that it takes to open this container is this.” She touched the symbol, which was again glowing with a silver light as before, and as before the light swirled around the curves of the object and it popped open.

“You’re going to have to explain that!”

## Chapter 5

Rocky Mountain High

When: Moment's later

Where: Professor Fig's office

Aerith paused, trying to collect her thoughts. "I'm not sure I can, at least in full," she finally managed.

"But you must!"

"I've never seen it before, if that's what you're thinking."

"But you must!"

"There are things I just can't tell you about myself."

"But you must!"

"Look. When I saw the container for the first time," *thirty seconds before George was killed by a dragon*, "there was a light shining from that symbol. Somehow," *because I had done it before*, "I knew that simply touching it would allow me to open it. So I did, and it worked. I had no idea we would see a key inside or what lock that key fits into. I don't recognize the symbol on the key or the container. I've never run into any mysterious doors that would need such a huge key. Why it responded to me, alone, I have no idea. That's all I can tell you."

"But you-" He seemed to shake himself. "Okay, okay, I understand. This is all very irregular." He took the case and looked the key over again, sitting down at his desk. "My wife, Miriam, was searching for traces of an ancient magic. Perhaps she really found it, after all."

"A magic that locks things until a specific person touches them?" she asked. "That doesn't seem very useful."

"It can do more than that," he told her, distracted by the key.

"Like what? And for that matter, isn't all magic 'ancient?' I mean magic has been around forever, right? This castle was built by it, almost a thousand years ago. That's pretty ancient sounding to me."

"I think that's how she got interested in tracking it down," he admitted. "Hogwarts is supposed to be a repository of ancient magic."

"Er, okay?" She wasn't convinced. "That's like saying a library is a 'repository of ancient wisdom' because books can be found there. This is a place of learning, of course it's a repository of ancient magic. How long have people used the summoning charm? Forever, I would guess."

He chuckled. "That's not inaccurate. And yet, here you are. Right when this key surfaces, so too does the person that can open the box containing it."

"But from everything I've read, which admittedly isn't much, magic isn't aware, if you will. It didn't draw the two of us together by manipulating events the last five years. It would have had to spark your wife's interest at exactly the right time to send the key to George, who met you while taking me to school and handed it over and then I happened to take an interest because it was shining. Any one of those things didn't happen, that key would never have come out of the case. I'm nothing special!"

"Don't sell yourself short."

"Come on professor, don't give me that. Besides, you don't have enough evidence one way or the other. Maybe it's only fifteen year olds that can open it. Or young girls. Or anyone that has never

touched a plow. I've never milked a cow, been on stage to take a bow or butchered a sow. You don't know."

"True, true. But I say again, here you are."

"Fine, here I am." She threw her arms wide. "I opened the treasure chest with the magical key inside. In the stories doesn't the treasure come *after* the quest? Though I suppose Arthur pulled the sword from the stone and then went on to be king... Say, that story wouldn't happen to be true, would it? Never mind. So what now? I've opened the darn thing what's next?"

"Next we take it out, I can't be running to you every time I want to look at it. Then I'll study it a bit, see if I can find any historical record of the key appearing in history. Let's see," he looked around his office. "Where to put it so it won't be disturbed..." He got up but banged his knee on the side of the desk.

"I hate this stupid desk!" he cursed as the key bounced out of the holder and went skidding towards Aerith. It came to stop by her foot.

"Honestly, it's a good thing it's made of metal and not glass," she remarked, bending to pick it up.

"Wait!" he cried, but it was too late. The second Aerith's hand touched the key she vanished, and everything went dark.

She opened her eyes, sounds of the ocean waves meeting her ears, and blinked to try and clear her vision. "What happened?" she managed. No answer. Everything came back into focus, and she looked around. She seemed to be in a cave somewhere, and the key was there under her hand. "Oh that's just great. Sure, trap the key why don't you? If I'm not the one that's supposed to have it, why open the container when I touched it? But wait, there is a way out of here isn't there?" She stood, a little unsteady, and glared down at the key. *Is it going to bring me back to this spot every time I touch it, or has that magic been expended?* She kicked it with her foot, sending it sailing and pinging over the ground, then walked over to it and touched it again, eyes closed and expecting that awful wrenching sensation again. Nothing happened. She opened one eye, she hadn't gone anywhere. *Okay, fine. May as well take it.* She picked it up and glared at it. *Great, I set the book down when I came into the office because I wasn't expecting to take a little trip. Besides, you can't apparate away from Hogwarts he said. I guess that doesn't apply to magical keys? At least my wand,* she patted the inside of her robes, feeling it there, *is there.* She closed her fingers around it and dropped the key in next to the wand. Seeing nothing else of value in the cave she headed towards the lighter part in the distance, which opened up to a pretty great view all things considered.

She was high above the ocean, and stared out over the water for a moment, taking it all in. To her right were the remnants of a path she decided wasn't totally unsafe to use, and across the water was a decaying structure. *May as well look around. I can always go back if I need to, and just not grab the key this time. It hasn't been that long. Better to see where this leads though, so I have some idea if I want to come back here or not. This must all mean something, like Professor Fig said.*

She made her way down the path and came to a bend leading further in. The problem here was, the path continued past a wall slightly taller than she was. *I'll have to try and get up there. I can probably jump up and grab the ledge, but...* She looked down at her legs, covered by the long skirt all girls wore as that is the style of the time. *I'll never scramble up it in this long dress.* She looked around again, but the place was deserted. With a shrug she rolled the hem of her skirt up past her knees, twisted it tight, and knotted it as best she could. *Hey, that's not actually a bad look,* she decided. *I must have a real eye for fashion.* With that out of the way she nimbly sprang up the wall and scrambled up to the higher level, brushing her knees off as she stood. *Hello, what's this?* The path continued and in her way was what looked like a small chest. She glared down at it, it was a small wooden box with a hinged top, looking none the worse for wear having been sat here for who knows how long.

“Reveal your secrets!” she commanded it. The chest did nothing. She cocked her head to the side and put her hand on the lid, swinging it open. “Oh wow! There must be fifty gold coins in here!” She picked them up, feeling the weight of them. “Now this is more like it. But who left this here and why?” She considered taking the chest too, but finally thought better of it and just scooped the coins up. They went into her other pocket and she continued on. She found yet another chest, bringing her total wealth up to almost a hundred gold coins, and her spirits rose even more. It wasn’t long however before she came to a snag. The wooden bridge that connected the place she was with the place she wanted to be had rotted away a long time ago, by the looks of it. *Now what? If you’re going to mystically transport someone please make sure your infrastructure can withstand the test of time. I mean to say nothing of charms that may help keep bridges up, just making it out of stone would have probably done the job.* But as she got nearer, putting her hand up to shield her face from the winds whipping across the place she realized it had been all stone once. Those wooden beams that were left were probably the supports originally in place before the stone was added. *What happened here to destroy this much rock?* she asked herself, looking over the edge of the cliff. She could see the remains of the bridge far below, giant pieces of stone that looked smashed apart. She crossed her arms, tapping one foot and considering her next move. *Do I go back and not come here at all? It’s way too far to jump. What spells do I know? A shield charm, that won’t save me if I go plunging off this cliff. My break stuff spell, a spell to reveal things, and bring them to me. I wonder...* She envisioned trying to bring the rocks up from below, and jump on them as they came up, creating a very temporary bridge. *Dangerous. Very dangerous. I could come back to this point if I missed it of course, I still have space to keep at least one more ‘go back’ point. But the alternative is trying to climb all the way down there, swim over to that place, and climb all the way back up! Not happening. Hang on.* She got her wand out, looking down at the water below. *This will never work, will it?* “Accio!” she cried, pointing it down at the water. To her surprise a column of water rose up at her command, making her grin in surprise. “Now how about that?” *So I have a safe way down, I just jump into that water and let the spell go, dumping me... Into the ocean. Not ideal but survivable. But how do I get up on the other side? Hold on.* She looked to her right where there was a decorative column still intact, though tilting at a precarious angle. She gave it a few kicks but for a wonder it was pretty solid, and shrugged, climbing up on it. A bit tricky with only one hand because she was still holding her wand, but she worked it out. The water went a little higher. She moved the wand up and down, finally bringing it above her head. The water climbed even higher.

*So let’s say I’m down in the water, right? I summon the water around me up towards the wand. It pushes me up a bit. Now I’m higher, but still summoning the water around me. Which pushes me higher. Basically I just do an Accio with my wand as high as it will go, and the water will carry me up to where I need to be!* She jumped off the pillar and considered her options a moment more. *Right.* She let the water go and unknotted her skirt, setting it on the stone that was right there. Into this she placed the key and the coins, her only possessions at the moment. Then she folded it up making as much of a sack as she could, tying the ends together. *Now all I have to do is not drop it. Good thing I don’t have the book, it wouldn’t survive a trip into the water. Unless they spelled it to be impervious to rain? I’ll have to ask.* She slipped the sack up her arm, holding it tight to her body and steeled herself for what needed to be done. Her “go back” point was set to this moment, if something happened no one would be the wiser. Once again she summoned the pillar of water and taking a deep breath, jumped into it. She “floated” down and soon was in the ocean proper, then struck out as best she could for the other side. It wasn’t too far but the place was quite windy and the waves were not cooperating. But she managed as best she could, and it was time for the moment of truth. She cast again, holding her wand up, and the water started to gather. It worked! She floated straight up by summoning more and more water “below” her and flung herself onto the ledge on the other side. Rolling to her back she let the magic go, panting and marveling that she had made it.

“Take that, ancient structure!” she shouted to the sky. “I, Aerith, have bested you!”

She rung out her clothes as best she could, but didn't put the soggy skirt back on. She just left it as a bundle and walked up the remaining stairs to the structure ahead. The walls here were crumbling and old, the footing uneven. *It must have been quite grand in its time*, she thought to herself. *Wait, don't tell me.* She looked around. "Was the key to this person's house? Is this all just a big joke? Did I do all this for nothing? If there is not some kind of grand treasure at the end of all this I will be very cross." Her eyes narrowed as they came upon a statue of some kind that seemed remarkably intact. *Oh sure, put some kind of charm on your stupid statue to make sure it stays all nice and pretty, but neglect to do so on the path here so I have to get wet. Classy, really classy.*

She spent several minutes poking around the place, finding some kind of mural on the wall and lots of smashed pottery. Birds nests, old bird poop, and plenty of weeds and moss covered every surface. No treasure. No stairs down. Nothing. Aerith was beginning to regret her little excursion out here when she went around the side and found another passageway, that must have led into a different section of the house back when this was a house. The back wall of the place finally yielded something interesting.

"Hello," she said to the wall. "What's this?" Seemingly painted on the wall was the same symbol as on the container and the key, but as she looked at the wall it seemed to grow transparent and show a room behind it. Backtracking she looked around the wall and verified that, yes, there was no room behind this place where she was, and went back to it. *Do I touch it with the key? I suppose my touch was all that was needed before.* She hesitantly touched it and suddenly found herself looking at a wall with different bricks. Spinning around she found herself in a strange chamber, very different from the place she had just left. This place was all marble, looked well maintained, and there was a desk some distance from her made of wood. *Ah, now we're getting somewhere!*

Shaking out her skirt again she dripped water all over the chamber, looking into every corner. It wasn't all that interesting, just a big open space with some grand columns and a strange looking creature snoozing at the desk. *Is that a goblin, then? Yes, I see the ears, it must be.* She walked to the front of the desk and said "Ding!" loudly. The goblin woke with a start and almost fell off his chair.

"Oh my!" he exclaimed. "Wait what?" He looked her over.

*I must look a fright. Still dripping wet, hair plastered down to my face. It's right for him to stare at me so.*

"You're all wet," he finally managed, probably figuring stating the obvious was the best route forward.

"That I am," she agreed. "Can you tell me where I am?"

"Gringots of course," the goblin replied. "Oh dear, I've just lost my job haven't I?"

"Have you?" she asked curiously. "I'm not here to fire you."

"Just the same," he said sadly, climbing down and coming around the edge of the desk. "If you're here for vault twelve?"

"Vault? Treasure vault?" *Now we're getting somewhere! Oh, a key to a vault, of course now it makes sense. Oh, this is going to be good, I'm gonna be set for life now, aren't I?* "The one with the key gets to keep the treasure in the vault right?" she asked.

"That's how it typically works, yes?"

"Excellent. To vault twelve then!"

"The key?" He held out a hand.

"Of course!" *And now that we're away from there I hope it doesn't whisk us back.* But she was able to get it out of her robes and hand it to him, and he stayed there.

"That seems in order." He walked to the edge and summoned a cart, so they both climbed aboard.

A harrowing ride later, which got her soaked a second time as they passed under a waterfall the goblin shouted at her was the “thief’s downfall” they slowed to a halt as a goblin in a blue uniform held up a hand.

“Destination,” he asked gruffly.

“Vault twelve, after all these years!” the goblin replied proudly.

He looked Aerith up and down suspiciously and she glared back at him.

“Move along then,” he commanded, and the cart started up again. It finally rolled to a halt and they stepped out. *I hope no one needs to get to vault eleven in the next few moments. There’s only one track, and now this cart is blocking the way. How do they keep from crashing into each other? I suppose the same way trains do? But they have a schedule right?* She shook off her thoughts as he placed the key into the lock, unlocking the various protections on the door. Aerith held her hand out for it again, she certainly wasn’t going to let that key out of her sight, and he handed it back. Stepping inside there didn’t seem to be much treasure lying around. It was a fairly small room, lit by candles that for a wonder were still lit and burning after all this time. A few shelves carved into the rock and a dead end before her. It only took her a few seconds to take all this in and she turned back.

“Is this some sort of joke?”

“The instructions for vault twelve indicate that I am to grant access to the holder of the key, and then close door.” The goblin gave a wave and the door slammed shut in her face, locking again.

*It just keeps getting better.*

## Chapter 6

Memories, all alone in the moonlight

When: Unbroken time

Where: Vault 12

And so, Aerith was locked into a small room at the bottom of a bank and no one but one, no make that two goblins, knew where she was. She still wasn't worried, both of today's 'go back' points were still in her mind, nothing she had been through had even changed that. "Well, I know all of four spells, let's see if one of them can get me out of this. *Revelio*." Hoping something could be seen through the walls she was pleasantly surprised to discover that the dead end before her wasn't a dead end at all. It too had that symbol on it, not surprising her, so she went over to it. It looked like a door, but she saw no keyhole so as her touch had activated everything else up to now she simply touched it. To her it seemed all the candles in the room went out, and she was left in darkness. She froze, wondering what had happened, but when nothing jumped out at her she relaxed just a touch.

"Hello?" she called. "Is anyone there?"

Darkness there, and nothing more. Deep into the darkness peering, long she stood there, wondering. Fearing. Doubting. Dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream before. But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token. And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "nevermore." This she spoke, and nothing more.

*Well there must be something around here, and standing around isn't going to get me any closer to it. Let's just head for a wall I guess, feel my way around.* Aerith took a few steps and ran smack into a marble column. "OW!" she cried, which echoed back to her again and again. "What the?" She ran her hands along it, it was too thick to wrap her arms around, but sat upon a base. *Okay, so it's holding the ceiling up. I've traveled somewhere, perhaps underground still, that's why it's so dark here?* "Revelio!" Nothing. She set her path away from the column, taking measured and quiet steps forward, hands outstretched. She was pleased to discover another column only feet away, and when she went around that one, another met her questing fingers. *So this room is huge, wherever it is. But it can't be infinitely huge. I'll follow these columns to the wall, that way I won't walk in circles.* With a bit more confidence now she quested out for the next column but a glinting something caught her eye. *Light, or my addled brain dreaming up light where there is none?* But no, closing her eyes cut off the source of illumination so she was fairly sure she was seeing it. She made her way in that direction, and it almost seemed if light itself was bubbling up from the floor. This illuminated the nearest pillars, but beyond them was still darkness. No walls yet.

*Naturally. If I had a well, I would probably build the room with it in the center. But I have nothing to bottle it in, if I even could. What is this energy? It's not warm...* She held her hands out to it. *Nor is it cold. There doesn't seem to be a crack in the floor, where it is welling up from?* She poked it with her wand, and suddenly the floor seemed to ripple and change, and the area brightened considerably. The glow now seemed spread out onto the floor, which showed a suit of armor inverted.

*It's like the floor is a mirror, reflecting something above it, but the thing it's reflecting can't be seen. Well, it's worked so far.* "Revelio!" There was a shimmer and suddenly the statue was there. Nothing else happened though, and it seemed as she looked at it, the statue and the reflection were opposites. It was a suit of armor all right, carrying a huge sword and down on one knee. But the point of the sword didn't touch the reflection.

Aerith stood a moment, arms crossed. “Well?” she shouted into the darkness. “Now what?”  
Nothing answered her.

*And it would have been more than a little creepy if something did. If this is some further protection, what does it mean? It's not attacking me, it's just standing there. If it's a puzzle, what am I supposed to do? Drag this huge statue around?* She moved around it and gave it an experimental tug. Putting all her strength into it she managed to move it a little, and over the course of several minutes she alternately dragged and rested, dragged and rested, until finally she had spun the thing around. *For being what must be an empty suit of armor you're a heavy one. But I guess you're more like a stone figure that looks like a suit of armor.*

With that completed the statue came to life, standing up and then tapping the down-turned sword point on the floor. This sent out a shockwave of light, and out of nowhere more of the same type of statue started dropping to the floor. Aerith gave a shriek and did the only thing she could- she turned tail and ran out of there.

She was now just barely to the edge of the circle of light, as she ran out of there she noticed blue flaming torches set into the columns. That's what was lighting the place up, and she was hiding behind a column now and listening for pursuit. No heavy footsteps followed her, so she risked a peek around the column. The statues or whatever they were milled about, clearly trying to find her but seemingly unable to leave that area.

*Is that area what's making them move? If so, that could be the key. Stupid key, I should have just gone back right after I touched it. I'm not cut out for all this. But yet, it also seems strangely familiar. But I should have a staff, not a wand. Oh well, let's see if we can't use one of our other spells...* She crept closer, still not trusting that the blue circle was their limit, and stopped a column away. Lining up one of them she cast “Accio!” on it, and it was yanked forwards towards her. She stepped back as it whistled through the air so the column was between her and it, and she was satisfied to hear a smashing. Ready to run should the thing still be moving she was pleased to see it had fallen to pieces, and the others seemed to not be aware of it.

“And that's how a Ravenclaw fights!” she told it. “With brains!”

Repeating this several times she dragged all the figures out of the light, and as the last one passed out of the circle all the torches went dark again, plunging her back into darkness.

“Oh come on!” she shouted into the void. “What more do you want from- hello.” Now tiny wisps of light where at her feet, and moving away from her. “Sure, why not? Lead on then.” She followed them to another point of light on the floor and once again poked it with her wand. Now there were three statues there.

“You have got to be kidding me!” she shouted. *What happened, did I do it 'wrong' and now I have to do it over? But with more steps? And if I do this one wrong there will be six, and then twelve? But how else am I supposed to do it? I know four spells, come on! Actually, let's do something unexpected.* This time, rather than drag the statues around to face their reflections she just used her damaging spell to damage them. It took her a dozen flicks of her wand each but as they were not yet fighting back or really doing anything but standing there she was ultimately able to destroy them. The lights around her flickered, as if trying to decide if they should go out or what, but in the end the darkness came back, as did the tiny motes of light at her feet.

“Here we go again,” she muttered, following them. Something was different this time though, there was a sculpture of some kind next to the glow on the floor, and after she poked it with her wand (the glow, not the sculpture) the form changed to be a doorway. “Ah, out of here at last, perhaps?” She stepped through it, into another very large chamber which thankfully was lit with more torches and candles. *They liked their rooms big, whoever set this up.* Her eye was drawn to a birdbath in the center of the room, so with her wand at the ready she made her way over there. She wasn't sure what to make of it, looking up she could see no birds in evidence here, but one thing that was both floating and not a

bird was a small bottle. It hung, suspended in the air as if by magic. “Little late to convince me magic is real,” she muttered. She almost grabbed it, but then decided to look around a bit more. The chamber was fairly elaborate, at least the walls and columns were quite decorative, but there was nothing that could be picked up and taken away from the place. Nothing but that bottle. She had to laugh though, all that, and it seemed she hadn’t actually gone anywhere. At one end of the chamber was a door, which led right back to the small hallway she had seen after entering the vault. *So I am still in the vault. Was it all in my mind?* With nothing else to show for her journey she went over and took the bottle in her hand. It was about the size of her fist, glass, but almost completely covered in silver. *Perfume? Can’t be. How does this birdbath still have water in it? Shouldn’t it have evaporated by now?* She was about to stick her finger into it, probably not the smartest move, when she heard a large booming sound and the door at the end of the chamber rattled.

*Hoo boy. Now what?*

“Get it open!” someone was shouting as she got near it. It shuddered again and dust rained down around the frame. She could also have sworn she saw a sickly red light through the cracks made when it rattled. *Great, that won’t hold for long. Someone is using magic to try and blast it open. Typical, I’ve got company, and not a thing to wear. That’s the only door though! Maybe I can find a place to hide?* She ran back into the chamber as the door continued to be pounded on. *Come on, maybe I could climb one of the pillars and hide near the... Wait.* She turned back and saw sunlight shining through one of the walls. *Yes, that’s the ticket!* She ran over, slamming herself into a wall in her haste as it wasn’t exactly a doorway but another one of those ‘touch it and go somewhere’ walls. “Ow. Again.” She pushed off it, pleased to find herself outside. *Ah, sunshine, I’ve missed you. Now where do you suppose-*

In the distance the castle beckoned, and she grinned. *Did that door take me where I wanted to go, or was it always set for this location? None of this makes sense.* Gripping the bottle tightly she took her first step towards the castle but then froze. *What if someone gets that door open? What if that someone can follow me through this strange portal?* She looked it over, and it seemed to be the remains of a crumbled wall, the magic keeping it from degrading further to form the doorway. She considered, but it was too dangerous to be allowed to remain standing. She saw no way to step back through, even with Revelio, so she pounded it down for a moment with her only destructive spell. Creative use of Accio also helped, tearing bricks out, and soon it was a total wreck. *Try following me through that! Now let’s head back to the castle.*

She staggered up the final set of stairs and into Professor Fig’s office, who seemed to be nervously pacing back and forth. With her hair all messy and clothes only recently dry she had gotten some weird looks, but once in range of a Floo node it was a simple matter to get close to her destination. His face lit up as she dropped into the nearest chair with a sigh.

“Aerith!” he cried. “You’re back. Are you all right? You look terrible! I have some healing potion here, drink some just in case!” He rummaged through his desk and produced a small bottle of green liquid, which she took, looked over, and drank with a shrug. She did feel a little better afterwards. She also made sure to grab the book, didn’t want to forget it after all.

*Sure, after being dunked in the ocean and then pounded by a waterfall for reasons.* “Nothing a lavender scented bath and a light meal won’t cure. Here you go.” She held the bottle up for him. “A bottle for a bottle, how’s that for a trade? Hope it was worth it.”

“What is it? What happened? Where did you go?”

“It’s a bottle. A lot. Gringots.”

“Gringots?” He repeated, taking the bottle. “What in the world is this?” He shook it, there was a liquid sloshing around but after the incident with the key, Aerith had wisely not opened it.

“No idea. Can I go now? Oh, and here’s the key it’s safe enough to touch now but I suppose now that we know what it’s for you probably don’t need it.” She held that out too, but he didn’t take it.

"I was beside myself with worry! Are you sure you're okay?"

*Right, losing a student is probably looked down upon.* "Yes, professor, I'm fine. I did far more walking, fighting, swimming, and problem solving than I expected but that's just all in a day's work for a Ravenclaw. Do you not want this?" She wiggled the key a bit.

"Go back to the beginning, will you?"

She sighed. "The key brought me to some sort of ruin by the ocean somewhere. There, I stepped through a wall to Gringots. I was met by a goblin, nice fellow, and shown to vault twelve which I guess was his whole job. To sit there and wait for someone to stop by. He complained he was losing his job now. Once at the vault we used the key to open it, and I went inside. He closed the door behind me. I went through another wall, or thought I did, and had to smash up some statues. That turned out to lead just further in, so I think it was all in my head? Tired me out all the same, that's where I was smashing up statues. Some were animated, but I didn't bother animating the second set I just smashed them, much easier. I found that bottle above a birdbath, and the door started being smashed in with magic. See it turned out I hadn't gone anywhere, I was still in the vault! Is there mental magic like that? It was a creepy place, I wish I had learned a light spell before I left. My nose is still sore from smashing into that first column. I got out of there through another wall that let me out in the forest by the castle. I tore that one down so they couldn't follow, whoever was pounding on the door, that is. I've been walking back ever since. Why the key couldn't have just taken me to the last chamber directly... I'll never know."

Professor Fig dropped into his chair. "You went through all that? Alone?"

"Yes, and it was annoying because I only know four spells. I'm not setting foot out of this castle until I know at least a dozen more, including one strong enough to blast a stone statue apart!"

"You should at least go and get your own wand Monday afternoon when the wand shop is open."

Her eyes narrowed. "You heard me."

"Yes, well, be that as it may. Well done! You solved one mystery and brought me another. I'm glad you're safe. I, uh, don't suppose you could write all that down? You went a little fast and any detail could be important."

"Homework? School hasn't even started! Am I getting extra credit for it?" she asked shrewdly.

"Yes?"

"That's all right then. After a proper bath and drying my hair out. It's a mess."

"I suppose that would be important to a young girl like yourself. And you do deserve some kind of reward for going through all that."

"That's right, I do," Aerith agreed. "Tell you what. I'll trade you my report on what happened to me for a list of spells I should look into. A light spell, a floating things spell, a blowing things apart spell, anything useful you can think of. I have a feeling this is only going to be the beginning."

"How so?"

"Because once you figure out what that bottle is all about you're going to want to go somewhere. And I see the light and can interact with this strange magic where you cannot. So guess who is going to be dragged along on your trips."

"You."

"Me. I need to be ready. And someone was after it, I might not be so lucky next time to have a vault door between myself and them."

"But you can't learn a dozen spells in a day!"

"Can't I, professor?" Aerith asked with a big grin. "So certain are you?"

And so, Aerith went to find her new friends. They exclaimed over how terrible she looked, and she admitted spending a few minutes in salt water will do that to you. She also asked them if there was a charm that could put words onto paper instead of writing them all yourself, and Tina said not a charm,

but she did own a quill she used for mailing letters that did just that. You weren't supposed to use them in class because writing the notes yourself forced you to pay attention but outside classes was fine.

"Great. Bring it, hopefully one of the tubs is free. I'll dictate as I soak."

An hour later, freshly washed and dried and in dry clothes she traded her report for Professor Fig's list, which she presented to her friends.

"Oh sure," Sabrina told her. "We can help you work on those. But... now? It's getting kind of late after all. You were gone so long!"

"Sorry about that. Ran into some unexpected problems. It's fine," she told them. *I'm honestly just glad to be alive after all that.* "Tomorrow we can get started. You all still owe me a tour, I feel bad I had to run off and we didn't get to hang out today."

"We could still go swimming tonight?" Mary asked tentatively. "You had fun doing that, right?"

She laughed. "Normally I would have jumped at the chance, but I've had enough of the water for one day. Don't worry, before fall we'll go again, promise."

"You want to see the clock tower? It's pretty neat," Elle told her. "There's this *huge* pendulum that goes back and forth, and the gears are massive! And they say the whole thing works without magic, which is just, yeah right."

"I want to see it all, start where ever. Can we get an early dinner and spend until sundown checking the place out?"

"We found some of your pages," Sabrina told her. "The others thought it would look silly, all of us wandering around shouting Revelio every ten steps. But I convinced them the job would go much faster if we all took one part of the castle instead of you having to make a fool of yourself six times longer. I made a list so we'll be sure to hit those spots on our way around."

"Thanks," she said honestly, looking at each of her roommates in turn. "I don't know what I did to deserve friends like you."

"Maybe you were just really nice in a previous life?" Elle suggested. "Now, how do you get to the main hall from here?"

"Uh, this way?"

Dear Diary,

Remember when I mused about what the next thing to try and kill me would be? Well, it's statues. Many, many statues, made of rock, that looked like knights. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I "helped" Professor Fig with the key again, little did I know an object can be enchanted such that, when you touch it, you get flung across space against your will. Good to know! Now I can't touch *anything* without worrying it's going to whisk me somewhere. Can you even imagine? Enchant a galleon to send someone 20,000 leagues under the sea, and put it in the path of a person you don't like. They're sure to pick it up and zoom, they're gone never to be seen again. What sort of defense do you have against that? The enchanter could be miles away, how would the crime ever be proven?

To do: Can gloves keep you from "touching" the object and thus, activating it? Maybe always wear gloves from now on.

To do: Learn counter charm for taking enchantment away from objects for when you need to touch toilet paper or something. Or your gloves. Can you imagine if gloves would work, but of course you take them off to sleep, and someone enchants them that night so picking them up activates it?

To do: Learn charm to enchant objects in such a way. Maybe to a prison cell? If someone was harassing you, if the charm can be cast quickly enough, one of their shoes (for example) could be enchanted for a single use and whisk them to prison.

Back to the statues. I saw a bunch on the road leading from the school, to a bank vault, to some imaginary space? And back to the bank vault. Why did they need to be there? Professor Fig and George couldn't get the case open. Thus they could not use the key to travel to the vault. If the doors I opened are the same way, only I could get through them. Why try to kill me afterwards? Clearly whoever made the key and the vault wanted me there, if my touch activates all of this, but then they act like I don't belong there. And all to protect a small bottle? It's so out of proportion.

*I'm exhausted. Tomorrow I go back as many times as I need to. This is crazy. Learning more spells is the only thing I can do, so that's what I'm going to do.*

## Chapter 8

Going to Class

When: The next day

Where: Defense classroom

“You want to learn *how many* spells in a single day?” Jo asked Aerith for the three dozenth or so time.

“This list of twelve,” she replied, trying to keep her voice even. *The one problem with going back is, no one else remembers. It gets a bit tedious having the same conversations over and over. Not that I usually do it quite this much.* “I thought we would start with this one.” She pointed to the second spell on the list, having already mastered the first after practicing it all day today for about a month. *If only I could be one of those bushy haired, buck toothed girls that could learn spells after seeing them once that Sabrina had mentioned. If only we all could be! School would only need to take a year, not eight. Or at least you could have year one be nothing but “learn this list of spells” and years two through eight could be learning about Arithmancy and Astronomy and such. Strike that. Reverse it. You learn magical theory up until you’re 17, then you just learn spells for your last year of school, because then you can actually use them. That makes more sense.*

“Okay, let me show you the wand movement for it.”

She kept a careful eye on what Jo did, and noted her pronunciation as that was just as important, Aerith had discovered, as the wand movement. How that squared with casting spells without saying the words she had yet to figure out, but one thing at a time.

“I thought we would start with this one,” Aerith said, pointing to the sixth one on the list.

“I thought we would start with this one,” Aerith said, pointing to the tenth one on the list.

“I thought we would start with this one,” Aerith said, pointing to the last one on the list.

“Let’s do something fun today instead!” Aerith suggested.

“But you were so hot to learn more spells yesterday?” Mary questioned.

“The more I thought about it, the less sense it made to me,” she replied. “I mean, really, how many could I really master in a single day anyway? And what I am taking classes here for? I would rather explore the castle, get any more of those invisible pages out of the way we missed last night, and just hang out with you all. Once classes start we’ll be up to our necks in homework from what I’ve heard. We’ll hardly have time to do anything else!”

“She’s got a point,” Jo agreed. “We could play gobstones.”

“Or we could hide some first year’s gobstones all over the castle as a prank!” Sabrina suggested.

The other girls shook their heads. “Not nice, Sabrina,” Mary told her. “Just because you hate the game...”

“How can I like a game where I get sprayed with smelly stuff? Where do they even keep it? Unnatural, is what those things are.”

“Is no one going to bring up what she’s wearing?” Elle asked hesitantly.

“Oh, you like?” Aerith asked, twirling.

“I do,” Mary muttered.

“Honestly I thought she was pranking us somehow and was trying to see how far she would take it,” Sabrina told the others. “I wouldn’t be caught dead in something like that.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Aerith asked, looking down at herself. For this, the final day she was going to take before allowing time to roll over into Monday she had made some alterations to her outfit. Her long, bulky, hot, icky skirt had been neatly cut with a severing charm and the hem sewed up with a sewing charm. (Yes, she had a mix of utility and combat spells under her belt) It now hung just above her knees. She was also wearing gloves to prevent any more accidental portkey nonsense, and she had pulled her hair into a thick braid that hung over one shoulder. She had to keep resisting the urge to tug it, or smooth her skirt, but so far it was fine.

“A bit short, isn’t it?” Jo asked.

“It was this or trousers,” Aerith replied. “It’s way easier to move around in, and while you might not think that was important you could be surprised at any moment and thrown into some sort of combat situation. Personally I feel liberated and of the mind that no one should be able to tell me how to dress.”

“A lot of people are going to try though,” Tina told her. “Good luck with it, and everything.”

“Thank you. I’m still wearing the robe, I need a place to put my wand after all. It’s not like I’m running around in my smallclothes.”

“I suppose. Well, let’s hit any part of the castle we missed, you say the book tells you there’s still over a hundred pages to find?”

“That’s what it says,” she agreed.

“Where could they be? It’s nonsense...”

So finally Aerith had a “day off” not that she hadn’t sprinkled some fun days in between each spell she learned, but the others wouldn’t remember those. She had actually worn more and more outrageous outfits, knowing that she was going back, even one day running around in the very smallclothes she mentioned before. The short skirt had produced the fewest stares so she was sticking with it. She had meant what she said. Running around cliff-side ruins, jumping into the ocean, and fighting for your life just couldn’t be done in a full skirt. *It’s no wonder there are so many male heroes in stories, it’s the wardrobe. That’s the only reason.*

And so it was Monday, and classes began. Her first class was charms, and she was feeling rather confident. After several “months” of doing nothing but practice her wandwork she noticed that later spells on the list came to her more easily than earlier ones had. She attributed this to just getting better at the wand gestures and decided it could be like languages. The more you knew, the easier it was to learn others. But not quite knowing what to expect she walked into the charms classroom and looked around for a seat. The first thing that struck her were the odd desks. *This entire castle of mostly staircases and empty space, and classrooms are so tiny the desks have to fit two people at a time. So strange.*

“There’s a seat here!” a voice called down to her, and Aerith turned. She looked up into the face of a young girl with dark skin, waving her up.

*Of course there’s a seat next to the colored girl,* Aerith started to think to herself, dismissing her instantly. *Why would anyone want to sit-* She took a breath. *No, that’s not right. You shouldn’t think that way. She’s a fellow wizard and I’m sure just as capable as anyone else. You will not look down on her, Aerith Gainsborough, just because everyone around you does back home. You are better than that.* “Thanks,” she called up with a smile. She climbed the few steps (*ugh more steps!*) to the raised part at the top and took the seat next to the girl.

“You’re the new girl, right?” she was asked. “I’m Natsai. Natsai Onai, but please call me Natty. Nice to meet you.”

*Accent. Huh. Actually makes her cuter? Didn’t expect that.* “I’m Aerith, nice to meet you too. You don’t mind me sitting here?”

“Oh, not at all. My mother told me to be on the lookout for a new face. She said our destinies were tied together and that I should go with her if I wanted to live. She can be a bit dramatic sometimes, but here you are, a new face.”

“Your mother said this?” Aeirth asked, not really believing it.

“You will meet her sooner or later. She teaches divination here.”

“Oh! I don’t know anything about divination. But if it has a whole class dedicated to the craft there must be something to it. I’ll look forward to going and seeing her.”

“I don’t. Being in my mother’s class isn’t exactly what I had in mind when we moved here. But it is what it is.”

“Do you think you’ll follow in her footsteps?”

She laughed. “I don’t think so. I don’t have her gifts. But then-”

The door burst open and at the top of the stairs the professor, in his somewhat acorn shaped hat, descended into the classroom. He seemed quite easygoing, but while asking about the “difference between the incantation of the color change and growth charms” Aerith looked about the room. *Is this it? There’s only twenty people in this room. It could hold a lot more. Why are the class sizes so small here? I mean I suppose it’s good for individualized teaching but it must mean him repeating his lessons several times a day. Perhaps it’s a hold out from earlier times before the school existed, when there was simply a master, and an apprentice? I’m just used to much bigger-*

“No one?” Professor Ronen asked again.

*What? Different incantations? Of course two spells will have different incantations. How can they not? I don’t actually understand the question.*

She never got an answer because he went into a minor tirade about how the summer off had melted all their brains, and to pair up to practice the summoning charm.

This, it turned out, was right up her alley as she had gotten a bit of practice against stone statues recently. She had no trouble getting the book out of Natty’s hands, delighting her and the professor himself. A few more times and the class moved outside, where the professor waved his wand about a little bit and seemingly from nowhere summoned up an entire... Something. It was a huge wooden board with numbers written on it, and different colored zones. Aerith’s mouth hung open the entire time.

*What spell was that? Was it a combination of spells? Was he summoning stuff from a storeroom or did he just make all that out of nothing? I thought I was doing pretty good with the spells I learned yesterday but that- that’s crazy. That shouldn’t be possible, even with magic!*

“You’ll catch flies like that,” Natty told her playfully.

“This is a different level of magic than I’ve ever seen,” she admitted.

Natty folded her arms over her chest and cocked her head. “It does seem that way, doesn’t it? We’re practicing moving a single book, he somehow summons half a forest worth of lumber from somewhere. What exactly are we doing here?”

“What we are doing here,” the professor told her, as the “stage” had been built, “is practicing our control. Would you two like to step up first?”

“Not exactly what I meant, professor,” she told him, but stepped up onto the platform anyway. “Do you see what we’re supposed to be doing?” she asked Aerith.

“I think so. Summon the ball and land it on the fifty at the end if you can.”

“Exactly. I’ll go first, with red.”

“Suit yourself.”

She expertly grabbed a ball and rolled it towards herself, gently placing it on the fifty marker. There was scattered applause from the students to either side, and she gave a nod of her head.

*Uh...* Unsure about this, Aerith cast her charm.

And had to dodge out of the way as the ball came hurtling towards her head. It zipped past her, smashing to the ground past the platform.

“A bit too forcefully, perhaps?” Professor Ronen suggested. Aerith looked to Natty who was trying to hide her grin behind her hand.

*Laugh it up, furball.* “The... This spell... How... It doesn’t work like that!”

“I believe Miss Onai’s showing proves differently.”

“The spell does one thing. Summons what you name or point at, as quickly as possible. How do you make it do something different like just rolling a ball forward at a medium pace? Are you sure you’re not using a different charm?”

“Observe her carefully, and perhaps you shall figure out the secret.”

*That’s not an answer.*

Aerith turned to her opponent, who now made an exaggerated motion with one leg thrown back and her wand hand thrown forward like she was plucking a flower from a hedge and gracefully spun her ball to another fifty points. Aerith scowled at her. “That’s not helping,” she muttered.

She grabbed a ball and this time tried to only yank it gently, but only succeeded in pulling it through the air to crash at the 40 mark, skid, and careen off the side. The students sitting and standing there all jumped back, looking angry. Those on the other side backed off too.

“Please, mind the table!” Professor Ronen pleaded.

*I hate this game.*

“I actually feel a bit bad now,” Natty remarked as she pulled her third and final ball to the fifty mark for a perfect game. She got more applause. Meanwhile Aerith was scratching her head. *I lifted the water up by holding my wand above my head, and trying to summon as much water as I could towards it. So maybe in this case...* She bent way over, holding her wand as low as possible. Casting the charm now the ball didn’t so much as roll but skidded forward, but this time she was far too timid and it only scooted to the 10 mark, giving her a loss of 140 points.

“Thanks for the game,” she said sarcastically, wondering if she should go back to this morning, not sit next to this girl, and not face utter humiliation. But then she thought, *Eh, leave it. What’s the harm?*

“Do keep practicing!” Professor Ronen told her. “Next pair?”

“Don’t feel too bad,” Natty told her as they stood and watched the others students take their turns. “It took me weeks to master Accio.”

“That’s just the thing,” Aeirth replied. “I thought I had.” *Those stone figures smashed quite nicely against the columns, didn’t they? Exactly as I planned. That’s what the spell is supposed to be doing.* “Then he goes and changes what the spell is supposed to do on me. It doesn’t work like that, I still don’t understand how you were able to do what you did.”

“I think magic responds to intent,” she replied after a moment. “You clearly had practice summoning things very quickly. So now that’s how you see the spell, and that’s what it does. I’ve been playing that game of his a long time, so that’s just how I expect it to work. You must learn to see the spell differently, to fit the situation you’re facing.”

*Professor Fig told me accuracy was the foundation of all casting, but now it seems control has been added too.* “I guess you’re right.”

Back in the classroom everyone gathered their things and Natty said goodbye, as Professor Ronen was motioning Aerith over.

“Yes, professor?” she asked.

“Your wand, it isn’t your own, is it?” he asked.

“No sir. I hope to go into town this afternoon and purchase my own.”

“To have that kind of power behind Accio, and with a second hand wand. Or perhaps this wand and you just get along well, no? I’ll be interested to see how you fare with your own, as your magic seems particularly powerful even now. Control, I think, will come hard for you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when practicing indoors.”

“Good! You know about the extra lessons Professor Weasley has suggested?”

*The what? It makes sense to give me extra work I suppose, she must have forgotten to mention it when she gave me the book? May as well not get her into trouble, I can ask her about it later.* “Yes sir.”

“I will send you an owl with what I have prepared soon. Come and see me when you’ve completed it.”

“Of course sir.”

“Very good. Off you go!”

The next class of note was Defense, and everyone was watching two boys throw magic at each other until a spell glanced off a shield and almost caused a large dragon skull to crush one of them. The professor was there and saved him, but didn’t bother to have everyone sit, she just went straight into it. She demonstrated the levitation charm, then had the class practice it. Thankfully everyone seemed to know it, Aerith had it on her list as well, so after demonstrating it on a feather, which shot into the air when she cast it, and on a dummy, which got much higher than anyone else, professor Hecat paired Aerith up with one of the boys from before.

“But that’s totally unfair professor,” the boy protested. “I’ve never seen her before, meaning she’s the new fifth year. She can’t have been here more than three days, and this is her first day of actually being able to use magic. How is she supposed to win against me?”

“Perhaps it’s not about winning against you,” the professor explained. “Perhaps I have another lesson in mind you’re not privy to.”

“Very well professor.” He turned to her. “Sorry, I tried.”

“Thank you,” she told him honestly. *Seems a decent sort.*

A table rose out of nowhere with both of them on it, and the professor gave them the rules. “I want a fair duel using only Levioso, Protego, and the minor blasting curse. Clear?”

*Is that what the red light magic is called? Still, to use that against someone...* “Uh, isn’t that deadly?” Aerith asked.

“Only if you use it over and over,” she explained. “Hitting three times ends the duel.”

“Good to have the rules explained beforehand. And knocking your opponent off?”

“That’s another way, yes.”

“Very good.” Aerith smiled, she knew what she had to do. She wasn’t going to chance killing this guy with a lucky shot to the head or whatever. But she could follow the rules and win just as easily. The two squared off, her opponent looking fairly cocky despite what he had said earlier. She waited expectantly. His eyes narrowed, wondering perhaps what she was up to. Finally he had enough and cast at her. Aerith’s sense of danger warned her about it, allowing her to raise her wand and cast Protego, glancing it off the barrier that made. She followed it up with a quick “Levioso” which caused him to pinwheel his arms wildly. She smiled and charged at him, as he was floating it was a simple matter to push him over the edge of the table and wait for the spell to wear off. He dropped like a rock, out of bounds.

“Not exactly a legal move,” Professor Hecat told her. “I mean really, physical contact in a duel?”

“Oh, there’s more rules you didn’t tell me?” Aerith asked her innocently. “Perhaps there’s a pamphlet I could take after class, that explains them? This being my first day, and all.”

“No need to be snippy. Now, up you get, let’s try again. No physical contact this time!”

“Very well.” She scowled, thinking. “Will you allow the use of Accio? We just covered that in charms class.”

“I suppose…” Professor Hecat allowed.

“Excellent, thank you.”

The boy was more wary this time, but this time as the professor said “begin” Aerith turned and ran towards her edge of the table. Again her danger sense kicked in, allowing her to spin, making the bolt miss her, and as she twisted back around cast “Accio” on the boy, flinging him towards her. She dropped to her back as he got near, and he flew over her and into another student, and both went down in a tangle of limbs.

“I’m not sure you’re getting into the spirit of this,” the professor mused.

“I did win again, did I not?” Aerith asked smugly as she stood up. “He is out of bounds.”

“Let’s try this one more time. This time, you may not knock him out of bounds.”

“Very well.”

“I think I’m being played for a fool,” remarked the boy, jumping up to the table again. “How is this happening?”

*Because I’m a Ravenclaw, and far more clever than a Slytherin?*

“Begin!”

Again, Aerith bided her time.

“Levioso!” cast the boy. Aerith had anticipated him again, and with another casting of “Accio” his wand sailed into her waiting hand, and she pointed both at him. “Yield, good sir,” she told him.

“I yield,” said the boy.

“That’s not how that’s supposed to go at all!” Professor Hecat complained. “Give that boy back his wand and duel properly.”

“Come on, professor,” said another student. “Some of us would like a turn too!”

“What? Oh, very well, very well. Come down from there.”

*What? No house points? Fine, be that way.*

“So what was that all about?” the boy complained to Professor Hecat after class. “Is she some secret auror or something?”

“The point was for you to beat her, silly boy,” was the reply. “I wanted to prove a point. That in battle you will always be outmatched. Or outnumbered. Sadly, she proved the next lesson without even trying. That a clever opponent can win against a more skilled one. Well done on that score, I suppose.”

“Thank you,” Aerith told her.

“As for you, don’t be so inflexible in your thinking. Though I would like to know how she dodged you so well. Perhaps work on your aim?”

“Yes, professor.”

“Dismissed.”

## Chapter 9

On the Road Again

When: Just after Defense

Where: Outside the Defense classroom

“Well done, throwing me around like that,” said the boy, clearly waiting for Aerith outside the classroom “I’m Sebastian, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you. Thanks for trying to get the Professor to see reason before our little duel. You were probably going easy on me and I took advantage of you, sorry about that.”

“I... Yes. That’s it exactly! You know, if you’re up for more duels I wouldn’t mind you at my side instead of against me.”

“Do you think we’ll do doubles or something in class?”

“Not in class, no. What I mean is, we very well might, but that’s not what I’m talking about. There’s a sort of unofficial dueling club called ‘crossed wands’ that meets in the clock tower every so often. Might you be interested?”

“Dueling club? Are you insane? Even with just the minor blasting curse you could totally take someone’s arm clean off! To say nothing about smashing their eyeballs out, or chopping off their leg!”

“We’ve never had *that* grievous an injury.”

“But you admit to people being injured?”

“It’s dueling, so yes. We keep lots of healing potion on hand, don’t worry.”

“That’s not going to help you if you get your face blasted off. I mean, really, can you conjure up a potion to get you your face back?” *Or perhaps make you one mere ounce less pathetic than you truly are?*

“If you’re not interested you can just say so, you know.”

“I just think you’re playing around with something that’s going to get somebody killed. It’s not going to be me on the other end of that wand.”

“Very well. If you change your mind meet with Lucan Brattlebly, at the clock tower.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” *She lied. It’s already been forgotten.*

“See you later.”

*You won’t! How can he be a part of something so dangerous? I wonder if I should snitch on them.*

Heading away from the classroom Aerith saw Professor Weasley approaching and greeted her.

“How are classes going?” she asked. “Book working out?”

“Both are just fine, thank you. I lost big time to someone in charms but discovered I was unbeatable in dueling!” *To tell or not to tell? No for now, I need to think about it some more. Maybe they do play it safe, I should get the full story before I just go blabbing.*

“Really? Isn’t that nice. Now, I have your permission slip to go into Hogsmead and get your wand. I just need to know who you’re going to go with so I can put their name down.”

“What about my roommates? I’m sure they would all love to go and show me around.”

“Humm... Five other girls? I suppose with Rookwood and his cronies lurking about the place you can never be too careful. Very well, I’ll approve it. Give me their names, please.”

*Who? Rookwood? I thought he was named Ranrok? That goblin? What would he be doing around Hogsmead?* She did, and with her wand Professor Weasley added the names to the note. "I doubt anyone will ask to see this, but just in case," she handed it over.

"Thank you professor. We'll leave right after class."

"Very good. I've got another list here for you." She handed it over and Aerith looked it over.

"Seeds?"

"Various potion ingredients, seeds, spellcrafts. Just the basics, and perhaps more as an excuse to meet our various suppliers in the village. It's all been paid for, please use them as you see fit."

"I will, thank you." *Does she think I'm going to be brewing up potions somewhere? A bathroom, maybe? And where am I going to grow plants? Wouldn't the school provide any supplies we needed for classes?*

"Just make sure you're back before dark!"

"Of course, Professor."

"Now, when you do get back, I've instructed your professors to provide you extra assignments to help get you caught up. I'm sure they'll start coming in tomorrow."

*Let's cram four years of education into one year! Hurray!* "Yes, Professor Ronen mentioned something like that. Said he would send me an owl."

"My fault for forgetting to tell you earlier," she said apologetically. "Still, there's a lot to catch up on and only one school year to do it. I know it's a lot of pressure on you—"

*No more than almost being killed by a dragon, and then stone statues in some ancient vault.* "I'm sure it'll be fine, Professor."

"That's the spirit. I'll be paying close attention to your progress, do come to me if you start to feel overwhelmed and we'll see what we can do."

"Thank you."

"Of course. Have fun in the village- not too much fun, mind- and I'll check in on you in a few days."

"I'll see you then."

After class the girls got together and Aerith waved her permission slip at them. "Who wants to take a trip to the village?" she asked.

"Shopping!" cried Elle. "Count me in!"

The other girls all wasted no time in saying they were in and raced back to the dorms to put their schoolbooks and such away. They headed outside the castle and decided to walk, as Aerith said she would like to see the surrounding area not just go by Floo powder.

"It is a nice area," Mary agreed. "Let's go."

"What's going on in the Muggle world lately?" Tina asked her as they walked. "You came from there, right?"

"I did. Well, the latest big thing is what they're calling 'electricity,'" Aerith explained.

"Oh, I heard about that!" Jo told them. "I wasn't impressed, I doubt it'll last long."

"What does it do?" Sabrina asked.

"Not much," Aerith answered with a shrug. "It's good for lights, but the bulbs, that's what makes the light, always need replacing. They have wires put up everywhere, it's a big mess. Oh, but there is a machine- er, a device, where you put electricity into a box called a battery. Then you can get it out and use it to turn wheels. So it can power a carriage to move by itself, silently, and it can go a few miles!"

"That's it?" Elle asked. "Lights and making a carriage move?"

"Well, once we can make better batteries that store more of this electricity we'll have lots of moving carriages all over the place zipping about on smooth roads."

“It’ll never happen.”

“You don’t know.”

“Anything else?”

“Well, it can’t make toast!”

The girls all laughed.

The area was fairly nice and it was a wonderful summer day, not quite autumn, and the girls chatted and pointed out various things as they walked. Some large creatures flew overhead, making Aerith quite wary, but they were called hippogriffs and so she relaxed again. *And they just fly around? What if non-magical people saw them? I doubt a hippogriff can cast a memory charm.*

The girls made it to the village and walked past some surly looking characters lounging about the road, leaning on the wall. They took a special interest in Aerith but let her walk by without saying anything.

“See, that’s what wearing those short skirts gets you,” Jo told her. “Dirty looks. It’s indecent.”

“Odd that the teachers didn’t seem to mind,” Aerith remarked. “I was actually expecting someone to tell me to change right away. Maybe I’ll cut it even shorter next time.”

“I dare you to!” Mary told her. “Where are we going first, anyway?”

“Is there a clothing shop here?”

“Is there a clothing shop?” Sabrina asked back. “But of course!”

“Then that’s where we’re going first. This,” she hefted the book, “is a pain to carry around.”

“Why are you, then?” asked Tina.

“There’s pages here,” Aerith told her glumly, getting her wand out. “Revelio! See, there’s one now! And I’m pretty sure I see another one flapping away in the distance over there.” She pointed.

“I forgot all about that,” she admitted. “So why a clothing store?”

“I want to have some kind of harness made, so I can maybe carry it on my back or something, but still reach it when I need it.”

“I suppose that would be the place to go,” Mary admitted. “This way.”

They walked past various shops, younger kids playing, people out and about talking, and a few more of those delinquent types that seemed to be comparing Aerith to a note in their hands. No one else really paid much attention to her, which made it all the more creepy. But the girls entered the clothing shop, making the man behind the counter gasp and point to her.

“What is *that*?” he breathed.

“It’s a shorter skirt,” she explained. *It’s like I invented time travel or something. Bad example. Like I invented electricity. It’s just a skirt, but with less... skirt.*

“It’s fantastic!” he gushed. “Flirty, bouncy, fun, breezy, youthful, oh I could go on! Augustus Hill, at your service. Did you create this?”

“I wanted something that wasn’t trousers but was easier to move around in.”

“Of course, of course.” He came around the counter and looked her over. “Do you realize what you’ve done?”

“No?”

“Revolutionized fashion, that’s what! My goodness, I’m getting a flood of ideas now! What about cutting it at an angle so it’s longer on just one side? Or maybe the back? Wait, just wait right there!” He waved his wand and a measuring tape sprang out of somewhere, and started taking her measurements.

“Hey!”

“Not to worry, not to worry, the strictest of confidence between a woman and her tailor. Yes yes, let’s see.” He got out a bolt of cloth and started waving his wand around it like conducting a symphony.

It was cut, folded, sewn, pressed and turned into a pleated mini-skirt in the blink of an eye. “Here, quick! You can go behind that screen, try it on!”

“Oh, okay?” She looked to the others who basically looked at her like “you brought this on yourself you know” and went behind the screen. She took off her robe, slipping out of the skirt she was wearing, and slipped on the new one. *It’s different, all right.* She stepped out and Augustus almost purred.

“Give us a twirl then!” he pleaded. She spun. “How does it feel?”

“Nice. I’d wear it.”

“Splendid! I have many more ideas but I need more materials. Can you see it? Short skirts made with leather? Knitted in yarn that moves across the spectrum? Asymmetrical. Layers. Dresses that are just as short. And if the bottom can be shortened, why not the top? Show your belly button off! Or cut out shapes. Or dresses without a back-”

“Let’s not go overboard,” Aerith protested, waving her hands. “I just didn’t want to wear trousers.”

But he wasn’t about to be stopped. “Shortened trousers, of course! *Tight* trousers made of stretchy material. And of course that’s not even counting magical materials! Can you imagine a skirt made of water, or pure light? Of course not, I just invented it, otherwise you would have. My dear this could be the break I’ve been waiting for my entire life. I have a proposition for you.” He folded his hands in front of him.

“I’m listening...”

“Come back every few days, or I’ll have my creations shipped to you if you can’t leave the castle. Wear them. They’re yours, free of charge! Report back how they fit, how they stand up to everyday wear. And if anyone asks, tell them where you got them. I’ll give you a commission for each piece I sell following those designs.”

“We’ll want something in writing before she agrees to anything like that,” Elle stepped between them. “And what’s the commission? Ten percent? For how long? At least a year, to be renegotiated as long as you sell *her* invention.”

“Elle...” Aerith tried to stop her.

“Shhh, well?”

“I’m sure we can come to some agreement,” he stuttered.

*Does she want to go into contract writing or something? Law? She seems to know what to ask.*

“Fine. Send it along with the first shipment. We’ll look it over, and if the terms are acceptable she’ll sign it.”

“Wait, I’ll wear them too,” Mary suddenly exclaimed. “I could hand out cards, so you would know if it was me or Aerith who referred the person and you could pay us based on the cards you get back every month!”

“More advertising is better,” he mused. “Save when it is time to save, make it rain when it is time to spend, my father always told me. Very well, I’ll need your measurements as well.”

“Of course! But I’ll want those new tops you were talking about too.”

While he took her measurements Aerith put the robe and the original skirt in the book, then closed it up. *Might as well go all the way, not bother with the robe when I’m not in school.*

“Now, you must have come in here for something,” Augustus told her. “What can I actually do for you? More tops? New robes? A set of cat ears?”

“Cat ears?” the girls echoed.

“Yes, my newest creation!” He got a box of them from under the counter. “Stuffed cat ears on a band you wear on your head. Try it on!” He handed them out, and the girls put them on, admiring themselves in the mirror.

*They do look cute on me, no doubt about that.*

“One Galleon, what do you say?”

Everyone but Aerith handed them back, she dug out a coin and handed it over.

“Really?” Elle asked her.

“Maybe it’ll distract from my legs,” she said, trying not to grin. “Meow.”

“You’ve got that right.”

“But my real purpose was to see if you could make a harness for this.” She showed him the book and what she wanted. To carry it without carrying it, sort of thing.

“It’s pretty bulky,” he admitted, looking it over. “But we are lucky it has this clasp, I think. Yes, I wonder. It wouldn’t go flapping about, would it? What if I put it in a sort of cage, some metal bits here and here, hinged of course so you could open it up still. Then on the spine put a cross piece with a hole in it. You’ll want something that can go with any outfit of course, so I’m thinking a belt. Worn a bit untraditionally, higher on one side but with a hook on the other. The hook of course would have a semi-permanent sticking charm put on it.”

“Semi-permanent?” Aerith asked.

“Naturally. There are permanent sticking charms of course, we just want to keep the book in place as you go up and down stairs and such. A good tug will free it right up, and you’ll always be able to have it close at hand. What do you say?”

“If you can do it, that sounds ideal.”

“I admit, metal working isn’t my usual thing, but I have some metal strips left from when I tried to make a dress completely out of metal strips. It didn’t work out too well. I think I can repurpose them.”

“What about a dress made entirely of belts?” Jo asked.

“Girls, girls, you *must* promise me never to enter the trade or I’ll be out of business in a week! Now where did I put those strips?” He rummaged around the shop, looking, and eventually found them. Using his wand to bend the metal he started with it just where the paper was, wrapped it around the cover, across the front of the book to the spine, cut the metal, continued around the spine, cut it again, and repeated it across the back. He repeated the same thing for the bottom, found and joined some hinges, and when satisfied it would open freely, cut another piece (that he had put a hole in) to fit, and joined that together. It was then a simple matter to create a belt out of a thick leather he had, put a buckle on it that he had created with a hook, and hang the book at her hip. (As an added bonus he included a wand holster on the other side) Naturally he enchanted the hook as he had said, so while she jumped around and tried to shake it off she could not, but a swift tug did in fact free it and allow her easy access to the book.

“That was really something,” Elle told him. “I mean I knew we wizards and witches did everything with magic but bending metal like that? Fusing it together? You had an idea for something and you just stood there and made it with what you had on hand. That was pretty remarkable.”

“Do you have an interest in metalworking?” he asked.

“I’m starting to.”

“The spells I know will only take one so far, of course. I couldn’t make you a figurine or anything, but this level of control was good enough for making buttons and hatbands and such. I’m sure your library at the school would have more books on it, if you were interested.”

“I’ll take a look.”

“Now, Aerith, was it? How is it? Satisfied?”

“Completely. Thank you. How much?”

“Ten galleons?”

“Done.” She got the money out and paid him. *Thank you, seaside chests! And whoever just left them there. I seem to recall seeing more chests around town, just sitting there out in the open. Can I just... take whatever is in them? They weren’t locked, so...*

“It looks... right, on you,” he remarked. “How strange.”

“Well, thank you. I’ll send you an owl to let you know if I can come back or not. Hopefully I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Thanks for stopping by!”

They headed to the other shops, and as good as her word each had something for her. Seeds, potion making ingredients, magically charged papers the one proprietor called spellcrafts.

“These work in concert with various spells,” he explained. “When you get around to transfiguration magic, it will all be explained. Basically it helps the magic to know how to create more complex forms than can normally be made with basic spells alone.”

“I’m sure that *will* make sense to me soon, thank you.”

Naturally she looked over everything the shops sold, in case she needed something in the future. She had gold, but wasn’t sure what, if anything, extra she should buy. Moreover she wondered *why* exactly she was buying seeds and potion making things when really, the school should be providing anything it wanted the students to learn about, right? *Especially recipes. Don’t I have a whole potions textbook full of them? But then, maybe the education is free, but everything else you have to pay for yourself. So do poor people learn less because they can’t afford twenty bottles of leach juice, whatever that is, and so can’t practice potions the same amount as someone more wealthy can? I really hope leach juice isn’t what I think it is... Well, this is what she wanted me to start with, so I’ll just stick with this. I saw lots of Floo nodes in town I can always pop back here, right?*

All the while they walked around the town they noticed Aerith continued to get a lot of attention, at least by unsavory types. They seemed to be congregating and arguing about something they were looking at while looking at her.

“Well, can you really blame them?” Elle asked. “She’s wearing cat ears for goodness sake, and I swear her skirt gets shorter every time I look at it! Hey, maybe I should suggest *that* idea to the clothing guy.”

“I think the cat ears are cute,” Mary told her.

“No, something is off,” Jo told them all. “Look... carefully, and try not to be too obvious about it. See all the usual townspeople?”

Aerith looked. There were various wizards and witches standing around, sitting around, well dressed and well mannered. They went about their business of hurrying to and fro, or complaining about ministry inaction, or high prices or whatnot. Kids wove in and out the crowds, throwing balls, “flying” on tiny brooms, playing hopscotch. None of these gave Aerith and her friends a second look, cat ears and short skirts included. But those that looked like they had been sleeping out in the woods these past three weeks? They were quite interested in her.

“What’s the last thing?” Tina asked.

“The most important of all,” Aerith replied. “My own wand.”

“Ollivander’s then. This way, let’s get it and get out of here. I have a bad feeling...”

The girls entered the wand shop and greeted the wand maker, who was expecting her. He set out to find her a wand, exclaiming how tricky it was after only two attempts. *Is his immediate success rate really that much higher? There’s a hundred wands on this wall alone. He’s barely done any of them.*

“I’ve a good feeling about this one,” he said, presenting her with a third. Aerith liked the look of it, as though many branches were wrapped around each other to make the wand stronger. It seemed to like the look of her too, as it lit up rather than backfiring as she tried to use it.

“Ah, willow. Nine and a half inches. Unbending. With a unicorn hair core,” he told her, reading off the card. “That wand will serve you well. I’ll throw in a handle if you’d like. Some prefer their wand directly in the hand, others in a decorative handle. Performance is exactly the same either way. I can show you how to fit it if you’d like.”

Aerith looked at the proffered handle. “Can you put a hole in it, just there?” She pointed to the very end, where a decorative pointy bit stuck out.

“A hole?”

“Yes. In a dual I used Accio to snatch my opponent’s wand right out of his hand. If mine had a strap on it, I would be much less likely to lose it that way. Or drop it, for that matter.”

“What a fantastic idea,” he muttered. “Young people today certainly are on top of things aren’t they?”

And so, old wand in the book and new wand, with strap, at her side the five girls filed out of the shop and looked around.

“Where did all the unsavory types go?” Jo wanted to know. “And what’s that noise?”

And then the troll attacked.

## Chapter 10

How Droll

When: Just after leaving the shop

Where: Outside the wand shop

*Oh good*, was Aerith's first thought as the troll, seemingly from out of nowhere, rushed into the town. *Something new to try and kill me.*

Most of the ordinary citizens screamed in terror and lass/lad scampered out of there, but the main six girls stepping out of the shop were frozen in terror. A hero unit took charge, a woman in a blue uniform rushing from the square and pelting it with spells. It roared at her, and two others joined in. Her badge read Ruth Singer.

"Lure it towards the edge of town," the officer shouted. "Keep it away from the buildings!"

"Right!" agreed the other two as the troll pounded after them. The girls leaned over, watching it run down the street after them. There was a moment of silence between them. Finally it snapped.

"Did you see that?" shouted Sabrina. "Let's go after it, see how they deal with it!"

"Are you nuts?" Jo asked her. "I'm not going anywhere near a troll. Can you even imagine it? A troll, here in town!"

*A dragon, and now a troll. There comes a certain point when one must believe they are the target of these things happening. No George here, or key, that I can see. I suppose it's only happened twice, and it's three times that's enemy action, as they say.*

"I don't have to imagine it," Tina told them. "I just saw it."

"Er, what's that noise?" Elle asked nervously, looking around.

The noise was, of course, a second troll, smashing its way through the front of the building nearby and sighting them. Aerith glanced around, there was no one left on the street to protect them. *It just obliterated that house! How strong are those things? And look at the size of it, and the club it's carrying. You get hit with that and you're paste. We've got to-*

"We've got to fight it," Elle told them, wand out. "Get ready."

"Are you crazy?" Mary asked. "We need to run!"

"It'll just chase us, that's no good. Trolls are stupid. Surround it. Cast from every direction, and don't let up. It won't know which of us to target. Come on!" She started running towards it, wand out but as of yet not casting anything.

"She's crazy!"

"Be that as it may, we can't let her face that thing alone. Come on!" Jo told them, running after her. The remaining girls shared a look but they had the power of friendship on their side, and all drew their wands. The two girls in the lead broke off and went left and right as the troll charged, casting the basic curse from two directions. As Elle had said this confused it, making it turn in one direction and the other to try and decide who to smash first. *Yes, that could work!* The others joined in, running around the troll and throwing what they could at it. Sometimes literally, as Aerith kept note of things like crates and barrels, and when they were between herself and the troll she summoned them with "Accio" causing them to slam into the thing from behind. This further enraged and confused the beast, it didn't really understand magic just that something had hit it, but there was nothing to smash when it looked.

“Keep it up,” cheered Elle. “We’ve got it-”

She shouldn’t have done that. The troll focused in on her voice, apparently choosing her to attack and ignoring all the rest. It charged at her, club held high. Several things happened. As it swung Elle screamed, fell backwards, and threw her hand up, as if that would help. Mary, who was behind it, cast “Accio” on the club, causing it to at least be harder to swing even if the troll didn’t let the thing out of its grip. That didn’t matter because from another angle Tina cast “Diffindo!” on the club, severing most of it leaving him with a stump. Aerith threw herself forward, putting herself between the troll and Elle and raising her wand high.

“Bombarda!” she cast, blowing the face of the troll clean off, and it jerked backwards, momentum causing it to smash to the ground. It didn’t get up, bits of face, and brains, and gore leaking out from the hole where its face used to be. There was silence again as the girls pointed their wands in case it could regenerate or something. Finally it seemed the thing was down for the count and Aerith turned to Elle, offering a hand because she was still on the ground.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah, thanks. Me and my big mouth,” she told her, taking the hand and allowing herself to be pulled up. “Nice work, when exactly did you learn *that* spell?”

“Ah, the thing is-”

But Aerith never got to answer as there were various \*pops\* and figures with wands in their hands started appearing out of nowhere.

“What’s going on here?” demanded one. “Are you kids having a gang war or-” He stopped in his tracks, looking down at the remains of the troll.

“Sir, I think that’s a troll,” one of the junior members of the group said.

“Yes I can see it’s a troll, thank you very much. What’s it doing here?”

“Trying to kill us,” Sabrina told him. “Thanks for arriving in time to help,” she added, dripping as much sarcasm as possible.

“You’re from the ministry I presume?” Jo asked, taking a step backwards away from them.

“Correct. When suddenly a bunch of underage girls are slinging spells around in the village we have to come investigate. You’re all under arrest!”

“What?” they all yelled back.

“What’s this?” said Ruth, now jogging back up the street. “Another troll? Two in one day? That’s impossible! My goodness, what if there’s more of them? We have to fan out and make sure these are the only two.”

“Ah, constable, good. You can help us take these children into custody.”

“Custody?” she managed. “Didn’t you hear me? There could be more trolls, this is the second one!”

“I won’t fall for your distractions. The law is clear, no underage magic.”

“They were fighting a *troll!*” she protested. “I think there’s some leniency called for here!”

“Ha! For all I know they brought it here, trying to cause a bit of a panic and it got away from them.”

“Don’t be absurd! I was drawn off by a troll that came from that way, these kids just saved the town from this second one. We need to discover how they got here, not lock kids up!”

“Yes, they were in my shop right before the incident,” Mr. Ollivander told them, stepping out of his door. “There’s no way they could have brought a troll.”

“It’s wearing armor, do you see that?” one of the ministry people said. Most of them were crowded around the troll, and onlookers were starting to trickle back into the streets now that the danger was over. “That’s not normal. Who’s going to clean this up, that’s really my question.”

Aerith looked it over. The man was right, it was wearing armor. Armor that glowed a sickly red color, to be exact.

“Is it glowing?” Aerith whispered to Tina.

“No?” she answered, confused.

“Of course it isn’t. Forget I asked.”

But the argument was continuing. “The restriction on the use of underage magic is quite clear,” the ministry official was going on. “We have the evidence recorded that underage magic was used, and here are the six girls using it. An open and shut case.”

“You really are telling me you don’t care where this troll, and the other one came from, that attacked the village? You would rather waste time arresting these heroines?” the officer shot back.

“You mean lawbreakers?”

“The real lawbreakers, you know, the ones that brought the troll here, are no doubt getting away!”

“You have some evidence of who caused this troll attack?”

“You know I don’t. But it was probably Rockwood, he’s been sighted around here lately.”

*There’s that name again.*

“Bah! You and that George fellow with his Ranrok obsession. Nutters. These girls have done magic, they are underage, it is your duty to arrest them or so help me I will have your badge!”

*I don’t want her to lose her job...* Aerith was thinking, was suddenly she felt something happening to her. A wand had just bopped her on the head, and she seemed to be growing transparent. A hand took hers.

“Come on, while they’re distracted,” a voice hissed. *Sounds like Tina?* “The Floo network is right over there. We’ll go back to the castle.”

“Right,” she whispered back as her body vanished. *Invisibility magic, why didn’t I think of that?*

The group crept out of there, Aerith discovered she could see, just barely, where her friends were as she knew where to look. This magic wasn’t perfect, but it got the job done. With the two continuing to argue no one was paying attention to them, and they made it to the Floo and back to the castle. All became visible as they popped back into the hall.

“The common room?” Sabrina asked, looking around. “Why did we come here?”

“Because we have work to do,” Elle growled. She stalked over to the center of the room. “Everyone, I need your help. If you have any hair color change potions I need six of them, one for each of us. Quickly. I’ll pay you back later and explain and you’re going to love it, a troll is involved and we all just killed one but right now the ministry is after us and we need to disappear for a bit.”

It looked like on one was going to help but at the mention of the ministry everyone scrambled away, saying they would be right back.

“Quick, let me borrow your hat,” Elle told one boy in a pageboy cap as he ran by. He nodded and handed it over.

“What are we doing?” Aerith asked her, as Elle advanced on her. “What’s going on.”

“It’s that *stupid* trace,” Elle explained, wasting no time in undoing Aerith’s braid and handing her the cap. “Put this on after we get the color changed, just in case.”

“What trace? What is she talking about?” She looked to the others, who were all rolling their eyes.

“We’re not supposed to do magic outside of school,” Jo told her.

“I know that!”

“Then you know what the problem is.”

“I don’t!”

“I don’t think she knows about the trace,” Mary told her.

“You don’t know about the trace?” Jo asked, concerned.

“Do I look like I know what the trace is?” she spat back, starting to get annoyed.

“Okay, okay, don’t bite my head off. When underage people do magic the ministry gets a record of it. Where it happened, what spell it was, that sort of thing. If it’s the castle they assume it’s someone

in class and they don't worry about it. If at night, well, it could be late classes so they look the other way. But out in the village, we have no defense."

"Here, drink this." Elle handed her a potion and another girl came running up with another one. *And how do I know this is hair change color potion and not grow hairy feet potion?*

"This was a cheap one," apologized the girl. "It won't last a week."

"That's fine, thanks. That's more than enough time. Here," she handed it to Jo, who uncorked it. *Nothing for it, I guess.* She uncorked hers and drank it down. As soon as she did her hair sort of rippled and looking at herself in the nearby mirror she now had raven black hair.

"Magic is so great!" she managed.

"Yeah, we know, get that hat on!" Elle pushed her, gathering up her hair into a bun.

"Okay, okay. But if they know who we are--"

"But that's the beauty of it!" she crowed, a big grin on her face. "They don't get the *name* of the person. And they may have *seen* us for a moment, but we got away. So we're going to change our clothes, our hair color, you're going to take off those ridiculous cat ears and put on a proper skirt, and they'll just look past us. A few days and they'll give up and we can go back to normal."

"Normal?" She was going to say there was nothing abnormal about a skirt with less material in it when someone burst in.

"Two trolls attacked the village!" he yelled, pounding up the stairs into the common room.

"Wow, that was quick," Tina praised. "We only just got back ourselves."

By that point other potions had arrived, were chugged, and the girls went back to their rooms to change. Aerith reluctantly put a longer skirt back on, scowled at herself in the mirror, took it off again, and changed into a pair of trousers she happened to have. *Much better. I mean the others did well enough in their skirts but...*

"Oh, by the way," Elle told them. "Thanks for saving me back there. Nice teamwork, all around."

"We all saved each other, no big deal," Mary told her. "Still, it was fairly heroic, you swooping in and blasting the troll's face off. I hope someday I get some cute girl rushing to my rescue like that."

"Yeah, where did you learn that spell?" Elle asked Aerith. "Not that I'm complaining but it really killed that troll. I mean I know you just got your own wand but it was crazy strong!"

"Wait, go back to how cute and heroic I looked saving her," Aerith stalled. "I want to hear more about that."

"It's fine if you don't want to tell me."

"It's just a little tricky to explain." *And I've never told anyone flat out I can 'go back.'* *Even in the magical world-* "We have bigger problems!" she announced, a thought coming to her. She got out the note from Professor Weasley and set it on the ground. "Incendio!" she cast, pointing her wand at it. Then the others had to dump water on the nearby wooden surfaces as more than just the note caught fire.

"Dang, you are strong," Jo remarked when all the fires were out. "That was just a basic fire spell."

"Thanks. What do we do about Professor Weasley though? If she gets asked who she let go to the village, our names will come up for sure."

Sabrina shook her head. "She won't cooperate with the ministry, she's on our side. Once she hears the reason, a troll attack, she won't give us up. I'm sure of it."

"I hope you're right." *I guess we'll know soon. If all these measures don't work and they still find us, I'll just go back and not go to the village. Or maybe just go alone? Learn that invisibility spell and go that way? I have to assume it was those men that caused the problem. That's why they were looking at that note, it was my description. Given by the goblin that opened the vault to whomever was trying to open it after me. They really didn't want me coming out of there, did they? But to put so many*

*in danger..I'll have to tell Professor Fig to warn his friend. He doesn't have the key anymore but he's a "loose end" so to speak. He knows about it, and that's putting him in danger.*

"Here," Tina shoved a pair of glasses onto Aerith's nose.

"No one is going to believe she's a different person because she happens to be wearing glasses now," Elle protested.

"You'd be surprised."

"Wait, I keep getting distracted," Aerith told them.

"You are going to tell me how you learned that spell?" Elle asked.

"Maybe, no, I'm talking about you. That was amazing back there! You're amazing."

"What? When? Who? Me? What are you talking about?"

"Yes you, silly. You saw that huge troll there, smashing through a *house* of all things, and you were just like, oh, of course, here's the plan to beat it. And we did. Take a second to pat yourself on the back here, all of us, you helped to kill a troll not ten minutes ago. But the plan was Elle's let's not forget. You didn't panic, and it kept us from panicking. You kept us safe, we owe you our lives! How did you do that?"

Elle blushed appropriately. "It was no big deal, honest. I'm just glad it worked, I probably read it in a book somewhere."

"A book on defeating trolls?" Sabrina asked, skeptical. "How many of those do you find at the local library?"

"I don't know. I just figured, this is their weakness, let's exploit it. And it worked. Honestly I was still terrified. Any one of us could be killed and then it would have been my fault. It just worked this way, and now you think I'm a hero. Fifty fifty shot, really."

"Well, thanks for keeping us together and focused," Aerith told her. "If I ever need a plan to attack a castle or something, I know who I'm going to."

"You got it," she replied with a laugh. "Right, let's go back to the common room. We don't want to look like we're hiding. We need to be seen and have any ministry people walk right by us, looking for girls with other hair colors and such."

"Do we have anyone we want to get rid of?" Sabrina asked. "Offer them the cat ears and we can watch them get carted away."

"Sabrina, that's terrible!" Jo told her.

"Let's do it to Tisha, she's horrible."

"We're not doing that, come on."

"Are you sure? Now is our only chance!"

"No!"

So the group stayed in the common room and did homework the rest of the night, and tried to look uninteresting and uninterested as ministry personnel roamed the place demanding to know who had recently been to the village. As Aerith was in trousers and a hat she looked enough like a boy to a hurrying official to be ignored, making her smirk a bit. But inside her thoughts were a mess, and it came down to *what have I gotten myself into by opening that container, that someone is willing to go to such lengths for?*

## Chapter 11

The start of ANTS  
When: The next day  
Where: Breakfast

The next day at breakfast Aerith got an owl from Professor Fig, asking if she could come see him after classes that day. The note said he had discovered two extraordinary things about the bottle and couldn't wait to show her. *That's certain to make the day crawl by*, she thought to herself. She stowed the note and went back to eating. Naturally everyone was now talking about the troll attacking Hogsmeade and the ministry's search for the six students who battled it. Aerith, still in trousers, glasses, but with her now black hair down again (she still wore the hat though) got many complements on her "new look," some with a knowing wink. (Mostly from Ravenclaws, they were smart enough to figure out what was up when six students suddenly changed their whole look when the ministry was looking for six students.)

As expected, her classes dragged a bit that day until she got to Defense, where Professor Hecat asked her to stay behind.

"You wanted to see me, Professor?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed. I've decided on the extra curricular activity I'd like you to do for me," she explained. "I saw you talking to Sebastian after your duel, did he offer to let you into his little club?"

"Little club?" she asked, not understanding what she was talking about.

"That dueling club that often goes on in the clock tower. He didn't tell you about it?"

"Oh that!" She had, of course, put such things completely out of her mind as she had more important things, like trolls and magical floating jugs, to worry about. *How in the heck do you know about it, anyway? I guess it's not as secret as they made it out to be. Still no less dangerous though.*

"Yes, that. Anyway, I would like you to participate. No less than two rounds won, do you hear me?"

She stared at the professor's wrinkly face for a second. Then she looked left and right, wondering if Professor Ronen was about to pop out from someplace. *But Hecat doesn't seem the joking type...* "I'm sorry professor," Aerith went on sweetly, "I must have spaced out for a second there, because I didn't just hear you *ordering* me to participate in a highly dangerous, highly illicit after school activity, did I?" *There, I gave you an out.*

"You heard me correctly."

*And you didn't take the hint. Wonderful.* "I did mention dangerous, did I not?"

"At your level, I highly doubt it."

"Professor..." she hesitated, wondering if she should go on. *But if she knows about and has done nothing about this so called club, clearly she doesn't mind breaking the rules when it suits her purposes.* "You do realize it was me who ultimately killed the troll in the village. I used Bombarda, and blew its face completely off. I can't imagine what that would do to a person! Even the minor blasting curse can shatter windows and tear apart logs. I aim a little too high and I could explode someone's eyeballs by accident."

"Don't be so dramatic," she sniffed, waving Aerith out. "Two rounds won, now!"

Aerith took a deep breath. "Very well, professor, I know just what I have to do."

"Good!"

And so she went straight to Professor Weasley's office and knocked, entering when she was called in.

"Professor Weasley," she began, "I have something to report, something that's endangering the safety of students here at the school."

"Goodness, please go on," she allowed, putting down her quill.

"Students are participating in unsanctioned and unsupervised duels in the clocktower. This must be stopped before someone gets hurt." *Or I have to participate, injuring someone myself.*

"I agree," she agreed suspiciously. "You have proof of this?"

"I have not seen it directly with my own eyes," she admitted. "But Sebastian told me about it, said to go see Lucan Brattlebutt... Brattleboy... Brattlesomethingorother if I wanted to participate. Additionally, as part of my 'extra work' you want me to do, Professor Hecat has just ordered me to participate and win two rounds. I'm not really sure that's what you had in mind and quite honestly I'm not comfortable casting spells at my fellow classmates in this way."

"I should say not!" she agreed, popping up out of her chair. "Come with me!" She stalked past Aerith, causing her to step double time to keep up. She also had to keep from bursting with laughter. *Oh, this is going to be good. Somebody's in trouble, and it isn't me now!* she singsonged silently.

The two worked their way back to the defense classroom, where Professor Weasley barged in and grabbed Professor Hecat out into the hall. She, of course, glared at Aerith who stared back innocently.

"Did you just order this girl to participate in some kind of unsanctioned 'duel?'" she asked hotly. "Which has apparently been going on for some time and you knew about it and did nothing to stop it?"

"Wow, didn't think she would run to the deputy headmistress straight away. I've overestimated you, girl," she said to Aerith.

Who of course put on her *most* innocent face and asked, in her most absolute innocent voice, "Whatever do you mean, professor? Didn't I pass your little test? You wanted to see if I would simply follow your orders even though I knew it was highly dangerous and against school rules or if I would *do the right thing* and tell someone in authority. Right?"

Aerith could now see the struggle on Professor Hecat's face. On the one hand, to admit this was wrong *in front of her boss*, that she actually *wanted* Aerith to duel fellow classmates without supervision, would perhaps get her fired. But clearly that *is* what she wanted, so to say it was not would be to lie and perhaps betray some part of herself. Aerith was of course greatly pleased with herself and enjoying this situation she had put her defense teacher in. *Honestly, the nerve of her, putting me in that kind of danger. Or worse, I could kill somebody myself, how would that go for me? The ministry didn't like me using magic to defend the town, to then admit I killed a fellow student 'by accident' in a duel that never should have been happening? Preposterous.*

Professor Hecat made her choice. "Yes! Excellent! Well done! As a matter of fact I only just learned of the so called club myself, and wondered if Aeirth here would do the right thing. And she has! Bravo. There are so few organic ways to test a person's character- Yes! It was a test of character, of course it was. And now we know Aerith is of unshakable morals, and not one to be pushed around by authority. All very good to know, wouldn't you say Headmistress?"

Professor Weasley ignored all this. "And you'll make an announcement this 'club' will never meet again?"

"I mean, it's fine, they're really in no danger-"

"I killed. A Troll. With one. Spell!" Aerith shouted at her. "Why are you having such a hard time believing this!? I will *not* fight my fellow students and maybe kill one of them!"

The door behind her flew open as all the students pressed up against it spilled out into the corridor in a heap. They scrambled back up and into the classroom.

*Well, that'll be what everyone's talking about two hours from now... Good job, me.*

"Prove it," Professor Hecat told her.

"Fine," she breathed. "Give me a target."

The class was whispering and excited as Professor Hecat moved the training dummy to the center of the room. Everyone stood back, Professor Weasley with her arms crossed and looking a bit cross as well. Clearly she wasn't thrilled about this, but was allowing Aerith to prove her point.

"Go ahead, you get one spell," Professor Hecat told her, gesturing to the dummy and stepping back.

"Fine," Aerith told her, voice hard. She steadied herself and went back to the troll attack in her mind. *What was I feeling in that moment? My friend was in danger, the troll was right there. There was a surge of magic, I had just gotten my wand. Reach into the magic inside you, it's right there, waiting to be used.* Her wand started to glow. "Bombarda!" she shouted, whipping her wand forward. The dummy exploded into pieces and everyone gasped and jumped back, bits of it raining down.

"Oh," Professor Hecat finally admitted.

"I believe I've made my point," Aerith told her, tucking her wand back into the belt.

"I'll make the announcement at lunch." Professor Weasley still didn't look happy. "And put up notices in the clock tower we'll be watching the place and anyone caught dueling will get months of detention?"

She gave a stiff nod.

"And my extra homework?" Aerith asked.

She glanced at the remains of the wooden dummy. "I think we can both agree she's, uh, caught up wonderfully?"

"Nothing more than regular Defense classwork will be necessary," she agreed. "Off to your next class now, you're late as it is."

"Yes, professor." She bowed to the others in the room, who were now clapping and made her way to her next class.

She was on her way to lunch when she spotted the girl. She was leaning against the wall, eyes down and looking sad. Probably a second year, from the look of her, and *wait a minute, I've seen this girl before, she's a Ravenclaw like me! But she always seems to be alone. Maybe she's waiting for someone who ditched her? I should ask her to come to lunch with me, in that case.* "Hello?" she said to the girl. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh, Aerith! Hi!" She brightened a little, but her face quickly fell again. "It's nothing, thanks for asking."

*She knows me? Crud, I don't know her name. But then, I am the troll slayer so...* "It doesn't seem like nothing. Come to lunch with me at least instead of just standing there."

"Really? Oh, uh, sure, okay!" She pushed off the wall and the two started towards the great hall again.

"I'm really sorry, I don't know your name," Aerith admitted.

"Oh, no reason you should, I guess. I'm Zenobia. Everyone knows you now. The new fifth year, and apparently you put Professor Fig in her place earlier today?"

"I wouldn't put it like that, but I did remind her how dangerous magic can be, yes."

"And did you really kill a troll?"

"I had help, my roommates were there with me."

“Still, it’s more than I’ve ever done. I can’t even make friends here, some people just get all the luck I guess. Everyone just hates poor old Zenobia for no reason.”

*You mean all the danger? Wait what did she say? She hasn’t made friends here? “What about your roommates?” I mean mine really took me under their wing, more than they even know with all the training they gave me they won’t remember because it never happened from their perspective. Can hers be that bad?*

“They don’t really want to hang out with me.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Sounds like you got a bad bunch, mine are great. I’ll introduce you.”

They pushed the doors open and Aerith scanned the room for her friends. They were waving her over and she pointed them out. “Come on, I see them and you can sit with us, as yours are big old jerk faces.”

That got a little bit of a smile out of her. “Thanks.”

But when they got over there, Sabrina and her both pointed and shouted “You!”

“Wait, what?” Aerith looked between them. “You two know each other?”

“She’s the one who stole my Gobstones!” Zenobia accused.

Aerith’s head whipped around to look at her friend, who at least had the decency to look a little bit embarrassed. “You did *what*? You said... Oh my goodness I can’t believe you.”

“It was just a prank,” she claimed, not looking at either.

“A prank?” both girls said at once. Zenobia looked up at Aerith with a “you’re taking my side and not your roommates?” look.

“Stealing something isn’t a prank,” Aerith went on. “It’s just theft. Give them back.”

“I can’t,” she protested, holding her hands out.

“You didn’t destroy them, did you?” Zenobia demanded.

“No, no, I just hid them,” Sabrina assured her. “In... high places. That was the prank.”

“I’m ashamed of you,” Aerith told her, fists on her hips. “There is such a thing as going too far. Zenobia, I’ll apologize on her behalf if she doesn’t, and we’ll go and find your Gobstones, whatever those are, right now.”

“You will?” Zenobia asked hopefully.

“Where are they?”

Sabrina looked between the two girls. Her face had a sort of “oh no, I screwed up big time and I could actually lose someone as a friend over this” look. “I’ll show you,” she agreed, getting up. “And Zenobia, I do apologize. I see now they were more precious to you than I thought, and I did go too far this time. It wasn’t just a prank, and I’ll try to make it up to you somehow. Okay?” She stuck out her hand.

“I just wanted to play,” Zenobia said sadly. “I just wanted to make friends, and share something I really liked with others. You didn’t have to go that far. But... I forgive you.” She took Sabrina’s hand and shook it.

“Okay.” Sabrina looked relieved, glancing at Aerith, who nodded at her making her look relieved she wasn’t going to get more tongue lashing.

“As long as they’re still where you put them,” she clarified, “and I get them all back.”

“Of course. I’ll... Get you some new ones if they aren’t. It’ll be my fault after all.”

“That would be fine.”

The two girls grabbed something they could eat on the way, food wasn’t technically allowed in the halls but neither was dueling and we all know how well that rule was enforced. *So if someone says something about it they can bite me. But not my lunch, because I’ll be biting that.*

“Here’s the first one,” Sabrina told them, entering a courtyard and pointing. “I can get it down for you.” She went to get her wand out.

“Hold on,” Aerith told her, holding up a hand. “Zenobia, there it is, how would you get it down? You’re in Ravenclaw, after all. This is just another riddle. We can solve it for you if you need us to, but how would you solve it?”

“I don’t know the summoning charm,” she admitted, looking up at the round ball atop the castle wall. “I could run and get my broom.”

“I suppose that’s one way. Is there another?”

“I can use the magic of friendship and just ask someone to get it down for me. Hey Aerith, you know the summoning charm right? Can you get it down for me?”

Aerith laughed. “That’s a good one! But I was thinking you could pretend we weren’t here.”

“You’re worse than the professors. Okay, okay, let me think.” They stood a moment. “The only spell I know to move objects at a distance is Wingardium Leviosa. And that looks out of my range.”

“Can you cast that spell on something and move it past your range?” Aerith asked.

“Yeah, maybe,” she admitted. “Can I borrow your hat?”

“Sure.” She handed it over and Zenobia set it on the ground. “Wingardium Leviosa!” She deftly moved the hat up to where the Gobstone was, brushed it off the ledge and whipped the hat around, catching it. Lowering it she got her first one back and handed the hat back.

“Nicely done! When I use that spell the object just tends to go crazy, I don’t have that kind of control.”

“When you use that spell?” Sabrina asked. “It was on your list, wasn’t it? When did you learn it?”

“No time for that!” Aerith told her, “Where’s the next one?”

And so Zenobia got all her Gobstones back, Sabrina taking them on a tour of places Aerith hadn’t even been yet, like the trophy room. Or more accurately the curiosity room, as it displayed such oddities as a suit of armor for a troll, elf, and centaur. Also something called the “goblet of fire” that was inside a protective case, and that her book said related to something called the “tri-wizard tournament.” Sabrina said it was a fairly dangerous magical contest that faculty would occasionally set up to test Hogwarts against other schools.

“Just how many unsafe things can I learn about in a single day?” Aerith wondered. As Sabrina knew where she had “hidden” all the Gobstones it didn’t take long to collect them all, but before they went to class Sabrina felt she had to clear the air.

“The thing is,” she told Zenobia, “it wasn’t your incessant need to play Gobstones that drove me up the wall. It was your attitude that you could never lose, and how you seem to be basing your entire personality on this one thing. Okay, maybe you’re good at the game, maybe you aren’t. I just wanted to take you down a peg, show you that just because you’re good at one thing, you can be totally worthless at another. Like, getting them back from high places. Cut the attitude and maybe we can play *something else* together in the common room when I get some time. I am not playing Gobstones. It’s a weird game and don’t like smelling like a skunk for hours afterwards.”

“I’d... like that,” Zenobia told her softly. “Maybe I did let my bragging get out of hand a little. I just thought if my passion shined through people would want to get to know me. Sorry about that.”

“Pick a different passion. Quiddich hunks, or horses, or insulting goblins with overly flowery language. Not something that gets you all smelly. Then we can hang out.”

“Okay.”

“Well, I see you’ve both learned a lesson in all of this,” Aerith told them. “Communication is the key. I hope you don’t forget it.”

“Yes, professor,” they both said sarcastically.

“Come on, let’s go see if we can get some cookies or something on the way to our next class,” Sabrina suggested.

“Okay!” Zenobia replied.

*Maybe she made a friend after all.*

With only one class to go for the day Aerith was getting excited about seeing Professor Fig, but walked by another glum looking girl by the library. *Do I even dare? She's not even in my house, she's in Gryffindor by the looks of it. Still, no reason that should matter.* "Is everything all right?" *Crap, I said it, well, no getting out of it now...*

The girl's face brightened considerably, and she grinned. "A new face! Yes, yes, yes, this will be perfect!"

"What will?"

"Look, can you just pop into the library for me? I'm afraid I'm persona non grata around there. That's how you say that, right? Stupid Latin, but anyway. I may have accidentally mis-cast a spell and now my books are flying around on their own."

"Tell me more."

The girl, one Cresida Blume, explained that when casting a spell she got a word wrong, so instead of making the books she was trying to carry light as a feather she made them 'birds' of a feather, and now they were flapping around the library like birds. This wasn't the first incident apparently, and she didn't want to be seen cleaning up her mess, again.

*Does it work that way? I don't know any two or more word spells, but you can just substitute one word for another, still have it work, but produce a completely different and unintended result? Crazy.*

"So what I need you to do," she went on. "Is get in there and quickly and quietly grab them. Hopefully they won't try to get away once they're in hand, and I can take the charm off them and turn them back into regular books again."

"How many are there?"

"Just five, and the Library is really small. Super small, you can walk through the whole thing in a minute, honest! Please? One of them is my diary, I can't have it flapping about the place, what if someone lets it out and it starts flying about the school?"

*Have to remember to secure my diary a bit better.* "Sure, I'm pretty good at the summoning charm." *It seems to be the only magic I do around here, apart from Revelio...*

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" she cried, giving a bit of a jump for joy. "Just down those doors. Please hurry!"

"Okay, okay," she replied with a chuckle. "Be right back."

A few castings of Revelio and Accio later she had all the books in hand, and once there was more than two they stopped trying to get away. *Birds of a feather, right. They stick together.* She handed the stack back to the relieved girl, who swiftly used Finite Incantium on them, making them still again.

"Thank you so much," she breathed. "If there's anything I can ever do for you, come find me. I'm good at, uh, messing spells up in creative ways? And, uh, umm, there must be something else."

Aerith laughed. "I'll keep it in mind. But if you do perfect your light as a feather spell, let me know. That sounds useful. See you around."

"For sure! Bye!"

*I should start a service. The Aerith Troubleshooting Service. ATS? No, no, the Aerith Negotiable Troubleshooting Service- ANTS. At least then I could start charging for all these solutions I bring everyone. Oh well, only one class to go and then I can go see Professor Fig.*

## Chapter 12

Gathering Pieces

When: That afternoon

Where: Hallways

Finally it was the end of the day, and Aerith went directly from her last class to see Professor Fig. More to keep from running into her friends and having to explain why she had to go see him but she was curious about the bottle herself. She knocked on his office door and opened it when he said to come in.

“Ah, there you are, Aerith! Wonderful, thanks for coming right after class I’ve been a bundle of nerves all day today I’m so excited about all this.”

“You sound it,” she replied with a smile. *He looks ten years younger.* “I’m eager to hear what you learned.” *After all the trouble finding the darn thing caused me.*

“Two things,” he explained. “The first is the contents of the bottle. It’s liquid memory, probably something you don’t have any experience with?” Aerith shook her head no. “I thought as much. It’s not very common to use it, and I had to search quite a bit to find a Pensieve, that’s the magical artifact that can help you view the memories. You pour the liquid memory into the bowl and, well, I can always show you if it comes to that. What I saw was astonishing! Two men creating what I must assume was the chamber you visited in Hogwarts.” He quickly sketched it out verbally, and Aerith agreed that did in fact sound like the place. “They also spoke of some kind of trial, and worried they had made it too difficult to follow. But I think we’re on the right track! With what you’ve told me about this white light and following it to different places, that must be the trial. They’ve clearly hidden something, somewhere, and left clues only you can see so it can be recovered!”

“Why me? It’s been hidden for hundreds of years, yes? It’s just so strange that suddenly someone comes along that can complete this trial.”

He shrugged. “You have a point, I’m not arguing that. Random chance, perhaps? Or maybe many people can see these magical markers but there was only one key to *begin* the journey. The key you touched. I mean I see the man’s point, only making one starting path for this journey was a bit reckless. Though maybe they didn’t? Perhaps they did create more and only the key survived to the modern day? Or you just haven’t been to places they left more markers? After all, you’ve really only seen the castle and a part of the village, right? But it seems to have worked out in the end, as here we are talking about it.”

“Oh professor,” she said with a laugh. “This is only the beginning, we have no idea how it will turn out in the end.” *I mean you could die, I could die, anything could happen.*

“Right you are!” he agreed. “Speaking of ending, you seem to be the talk of the castle after your visit to the village. They are talking about you, aren’t they?”

“That they are,” she reluctantly agreed. “Oh, before I forget.” She lifted the pages of her book, still hung at her side, and mentally willed the wand out of it. She discovered she could do this, not needing to pull it out, open it up, get to the right page, close it up, etc. etc. She held it in both hands. “Thanks for keeping me safe until I found a wand of my own,” she told it. “I hope you find someone good to work with again.” *Did it get a little warmer?* She handed it back. *Can a wand go back into circulation, as it were? Or once the wizard that owns the wand dies, is that it for it? Still, it worked for me so I don’t know why it couldn’t choose another wizard.* “And thank you for the loan.”

“Of course, of course.” He bent to the task of putting it away again. “But may I ask, how did you learn a strong enough spell to kill a troll like that? I figured your own wand would greatly help in your spell-casting but you still need time to perfect the wand movement and pronunciation.”

Aerith’s mouth was set in a line as she narrowed her eyes, furiously considering what to tell him. She had been worried he would ask, and really hadn’t come to any conclusions despite thinking about it all day. But it was the moment of truth, and she had to tell him everything. “I suppose you’re the only one I even *can* tell about this,” she finally decided. “I can trust you to keep my secrets, can’t I? It’s something I’ve never told anyone else, not ever.”

“My dear we are in this together! I need you to help complete my late wife’s work, and discover this strange magic she was researching. If there’s anything else you can tell me about that, or how you can kill a troll with a spell you shouldn’t even know yet, please do. Your secrets are safe with me!”

“Very well,” she sighed, looking around. She fixed this point in her mind, and felt it slide into place. “The best way to convince you is simply to show you.” She took a piece of parchment from his desk, uncorked two ink bottles, and handed him another parchment. “Write down something on this parchment. I’m going to turn my back and write something on mine. Then we’ll compare them.”

He looked confused but agreed, and Aerith wrote some nonsense on her parchment. *After all, I haven’t gone back yet so I don’t yet know what he’s going to write.*

“I’m done,” Professor Fig announced, and both showed what they wrote. Aerith quickly memorized it.

“It’s not the same, what are you getting at?” Professor Fig asked.

“It’s not the same *yet*, but it will be next time!”

“Next-”

“The best way to convince you is simply to show you.” She took a piece of parchment from his desk, uncorked two ink bottles, and handed him another parchment. “Write down something on this parchment. I’m going to turn my back and write something on mine. Then we’ll compare them.”

He looked confused but agreed, and Aerith wrote down what he was about to write down. Both showed the other their parchment.

“It’s the same!” Professor Fig gasped, taking the parchment from her and comparing the two. “I just wrote nonsense, how... You can’t be a Seer, it doesn’t work like that. The best Seer in the world couldn’t predict what someone was going to write somewhere. They deal in big, life changing events, destiny, that sort of thing. Not the day to day lives where we make a thousand choices every minute. It would drive them mad to try and look past all those choices to get to the- Wait, can you do this again? Or is it a one off?”

“Of course!”

And so it repeated.

10 times.

Finally, when Aerith’s ten lines of parchment were exactly the same as Professor Fig’s, and all in one go I might add, he heavily sat down in his chair, staring at the two. “It’s impossible. Ten lines, all random gibberish, I even threw in some Goblin language as a joke.” *I know, memorizing that line was a real pain, so thanks for that.* “But you predicted it. How? And how does this relate to your learning spells?”

“Everything,” she replied simply. “I didn’t *predict* what you were going to write, I *read* what you wrote, and then went back in time to before you wrote it. It was then a simple matter to make what we wrote match up. I did the same thing to learn every spell on your list in a day. It took me, I don’t know, two months of reliving the same day over and over? I didn’t really keep track, and I took some

days off to rest because even if I'm physically returned I still feel some mental stress from the whole thing. But it was worth it, with me being attacked and all."

"I've heard rumors of time turners being researched by the ministry, but I didn't know they had been perfected. Do you actually have one?"

"Have... one? One what?"

"A device that can send you back in time, of course! But to stretch time so thin..."

"It's just something I can do, professor. I'm not using any magical artifact to do it."

"Incredible! Why, the implications..." he trailed off.

*I have to tell him everything.* "They're bigger than you know. When we first met George, well, let's just say we were attacked then, as well. And by something larger than a troll."

"Larger than a troll? What do you mean?"

"We got on the carriage and took off. We had only flown a few minutes when George started talking about Ranrok and showed us the key. That's when I first opened the container just by touching it. But a moment after a dragon attacked. George... He was killed instantly, right before my eyes. The carriage went wild, it had been torn in half of course, I think the dragon was going to continue the attack-

"And so you went back!" he finished, eyes wide. "You insisted on us going to the village, said you wanted to know what Apparating felt like. You... You saved George's life, and he never knew!"

She nodded sadly. "Yes, he's alive now because of me."

"That's how you knew about my wife! We spoke of it in the 'earlier time' I never lived though, but you did!"

"Yes. I slipped up that time, honestly. I try not to bring up the previous times I live though, but I was pretty rattled about the dragon."

"I can imagine! Your first magical creature was one of those? Good thing it never happened, but you remember it, so then did it happen? This..." The parchments slipped from his hands as he leaned back in his chair, staring at her.

"I know. It's hard to wrap your head around. I've dropped hints to others, to see if anyone else may share my ability, but so far no one has ever admitted it. Obviously I can't just come out and ask, well I mean I could and then just go back. I've never encountered any limit on how many times I can go back, but like I say it's annoying to live the same time over and over again."

"I can imagine-

Suddenly the door burst open and the headmaster, of all people, strode into the room.

"Ah, Eleazar, good. I have need of you. Come with me!"

"Huh?" he managed, looking blankly at the man.

The headmaster snapped his fingers. "Up, up! Come on, no time to be sitting around."

"I'm in the middle of something here!" Professor Fig protested. "I have a student-

"Never mind that, whatever you're 'in the middle of' can wait."

"Uh..." he pleaded, looking at Aerith.

She laughed, and the headmaster stared at her. "What's wrong with her?"

She stood up. "Headmaster, everyone I've spoken to says you are, by far, the absolute worst headmaster *ever* to be in charge of this school. I just thought you should know."

"I beg your pardon?" he spat, face going red and starting to look enraged.

"Byeeeeee."

"Where do you think you're going-"

"The best way to convince you is simply to show you." Aerith said for now like the twelfth time. "But before I do, you know the disillusionment charm, right? It was on your list?"

"Of course, but what does that have to do with-"

“Quick, use it on yourself and stay quiet. We don’t have much time. You’re just going to have to trust me!”

He looked at her very curiously, but shrugged. “I’ll play along for now but this better be good.” He got out his wand and cast the spell, vanishing into almost nothing. He went behind his chair too, and basically was invisible, as no one would look that closely behind the chair.

Aerith knew she didn’t have long to wait, and when she heard the footsteps she put her finger to her lips.

“Ah, Eleazar, good. I have need of you. Come with- wait, you’re not him.”

“No, I’m much prettier,” Aerith told him, running a hand behind her hair and fanning it out. “Are you looking for Professor Fig? I was supposed to meet him after class but he wasn’t here. You don’t think he’ll mind me waiting in his office, do you? The door was open so I figured it was okay but I don’t want to get in trouble so I could wait outside if you thought it would be better.”

“I don’t care about that!” he blustered. “He’s not here?” He looked around stupidly.

“Unless you think he dived under the desk when he heard me come in and has been curled up under there ever since. I didn’t think to check, I could now if you wanted?” She made to rise from her seat.

“Don’t be ridiculous! Why can I never find anyone when I want them? I’ll come back later.” He stormed off.

“Nice talking to you!” Aerith shouted after him. *Not.* She went to the door and made sure he was gone. “He’s gone.”

“That was extraordinary,” Professor Fig admitted, ending the spell. “How could you possibly have known he was coming?”

*Oh good, I get to explain it all again.*

“And you say this is the second time we’ve had *this* conversation? After you went back ten times to do the parchment thing and then the headmaster burst in and you went back to avoid him taking me?”

“You’ve got it!” she happily agreed. *Thank goodness.*

“That’s... The implications... The freedom!” he sputtered. “You get to decide what you want the world to look like.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true, as long as I can convince someone to do a different thing than they did before. I didn’t want a world without George in it, so I saved his life. Never thought of it that way exactly before but you’re not wrong.”

“And you used this ‘repeating time’ to master a dozen spells in what seemed like a day, but was in reality several months?”

“Also correct.”

“That doesn’t exactly explain how powerful your spells are, but at least it explains how you know them. And you’ve always been able to do this?”

“Always.”

“I can hardly believe it, but there really is no other explanation for what I just myself witnessed. You knew he was coming, you were certain of it. Wait...” He looked suspiciously at her. “Is that the only thing you can do?”

“Ah, no,” she admitted. “I can’t be taken by surprise. If I come under attack I know what the attack is, and from what direction it’s coming from. Don’t ask me how, I just do.”

“So you can see residual magic left by charms from hundreds of years ago, repeat time, and you have some kind of sixth sense of danger? We need to get you into the Auror program as soon as possible. I mean, if you were interested in that sort of work. You could be the greatest one that ever lived!”

“I’ll think about it. Right now I don’t know what my future holds.”

“Anything else would be a complete waste of your talents. I wonder. A dragon attack, then a troll? And both wearing some kind of armor that glowed red. I dislike coincidence, there is more to all this than we know.”

“And someone was right there to try and get into the vault behind me,” she reminded him.

“That too. I hope we’re not getting in over our heads with all this. Someone may be many steps ahead of us. But if you can go back, and are as effective in combat as I think by virtue of your other skill, maybe magic is taking some kind of hand in all this. Maybe it ‘knows’ exactly what is needed, and gave us you? But enough about that. I need to tell you about the second thing I discovered about the bottle.”

“Oh right, that’s why I’m here!”

“Yes, not to disrupt everything I thought I knew about how magic worked. Take a look.” He got the bottle out and handed it to her. “Just there, see it?”

She took it and turned it this way and that. “There’s a faint inscription here.”

“Yes, turns out it’s a spell,” he told her, taking it back and hiding the bottle again. “But the most curious one I’ve ever encountered. I mean, I said the words and got a result, but I didn’t have my wand. So it’s not like any spell I’ve ever cast before. Maybe the spell was on the bottle and this was just a sort of passphrase? That would make more sense. Here’s what appeared.” He unrolled a map that he got out of his desk. “And if I’m right...”

“There,” Aerith said, pointing to one spot. “It’s that bright light again, hovering over the map.”

“As I thought. The library. Specifically, the restricted section. Well, no time like the present. You’ll be allowed in if you’re with me, let’s head there now before the so called headmaster returns looking for me.”

Aerith giggled. “I told him he was the worst before I repeated. You should have seen the look on his face!”

“You didn’t?”

“I did!”

He chuckled. “Even I wouldn’t be that brave, knowing I could go back and it would never have been done. Come on.”

The pair walked down to the library and though the librarian gave Aerith a funny look, she got the key out. “Here you are. Had to put stronger protections on the lock, that Sallow boy is always trying to get in there. Looking for a cure for his sister, so he says. Ha! I don’t believe a word of it.”

“Sallow?” Aerith asked.

“Sebastian Sallow. Slytherin boy. Don’t like the look of him myself, he’ll wind up in a bad way mark my words.”

*The same Sebastian that offered me his dueling club? I wonder...*

“Well, here you are. Lock up again after you go through.” She handed the key to Professor Fig.

“Of course,” he told her. “Come on Aeirth, time to solve this latest mystery.”

*Told you I would be dragged along. I guess I’m looking for more magical residue. Whatever that map leads to would have been found already so it’s not a book we’re after. It must be another of those ‘walls’ that takes you someplace. At least I feel ready to take on anything. It couldn’t be worse than a troll, right? And while I don’t have five other people I do have one professor, he must be worth five young girls, right?*

## Chapter 13

A section that is forbidden

When: Just after locking the door behind them

Where: Library

Aerith looked around the “restricted” section she was now in. It looked pretty much like the rest of the library, just behind a set of bars so you couldn’t get in easily.

“See anything?” Professor Fig prompted her.

“Nothing yet.”

“Let’s keep looking.”

“Hold on, there isn’t anything hidden around here, is there?” She pulled her wand from the belt. “Revelio!” She was quite surprised to see a page from her book appear, and allowed it to be sucked in.

“Really?” she asked Professor Fig. “Was this some sort of joke? Having a page come in here? I would have spent years rushing about the castle looking for the last page in a place I was forbidden to go to. Someone would have been laughing about that, no doubt. It should have been outside this section, not inside it. I mean, honestly.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with the book,” the professor admitted. “I thought it was a dumb idea.”

“Right?” she agreed. “It is! It’s really dumb! Don’t give me a book where half the pages fly away when I open it!”

The area wasn’t big, the pair headed down a second set of stairs to a dustier and less lit area, which was mostly more of the same. Shelves of books. However, here some of the shelves were behind thick pieces of glass, and some of the books were *moving*. Banging back and forth as if trying to get out. Aerith stood looking at them for a moment. “Er, if these books are so dangerous, and clearly they are if they can move on their own, why haven’t they simply been destroyed?”

“Destroy knowledge?” Professor Fig sounded shocked and Aerith turned towards him. “My dear girl, even if these books could be destroyed, and some of them can’t believe me I know attempts have been made, that would be unthinkable. Those that do dedicate their lives to fighting those that go down that road,” he pointed to a book madly trying to get out, “must know what they are up against. This knowledge has value, even if it is too dangerous to be general knowledge. Even if some knowledge should never be used, to think one book is the source of it would be pure folly. Some must know how to counteract what dark wizards can do.”

“I suppose.” She turned back, looking at the book sadly. *Right, if there are three copies of a book in the world with dark rituals or spells, how do you know there aren’t four? How do you ever know you got them all? So sure, if you need to look up a dark spell because it as used... Is this book aware? Or just trying to get back to a specific person? Imagine being locked up like this. Still, doesn’t that electricity stuff require moving something? Magnets I think? If only we could harness this book’s... enthusiasm, somehow. Put it on a circular track it could never get out of, put magnets on the sides of it, and let it spin in a circle forever. Put all the books that could move into some sort of device and let it make electricity. Oh well.*

“Any magical traces?” he reminded her.

“What? No.” She decided, looking around.

“Then we shall descend further.”

The pair kept going forward, now in a section that was clearly more storage than anything else. Vague shapes covered with white sheets were stood up against walls, and the air got dustier and darker as they moved forward. Professor Fig lit up his wand, and Aerith did too. This area looked more like large stones stuck together, they seemed to be moving into more the foundation of the place. As they made their way down a tight spiral staircase Aerith remarked “Who comes in here to replace the candles?” Several lit candles were sitting on the steps, forcing her to watch her footing even more.

“I think they might be spelled to last indefinitely,” he guessed.

“Ah, that makes sense.” *If you can easily make a fire that doesn't go out, why not do it? Better to make one candle than a hundred for any given space, even if the one candle is ten times harder to make than the one. You're still coming out ahead.* “But why light it at all? Clearly anyone coming down here would have a wand.”

“Don't ask me, I've no idea! Anyway we have more important things to worry about than some stupid candles, keep your mind on your business!”

She turned and looked sharply at him as they reached the bottom.

“I don't have to be here, you know,” she reminded him.

“Sorry, sorry, I'm a little on edge. Dragon attacks, troll attacks, these enchanted statues you say you dealt with. I have no idea what we'll find down here.”

“Should we go back? Get help?”

“And try to explain all this to the other professors? I don't know. They went through an awful lot of trouble to hide knowledge of this from everyone.”

“I guess. But what is 'this' in this case? Powerful, lost spells? Magical artifacts? I mean magic is magic, there can't be more than one kind of it, can there? Ancient or not.”

“You'll find out when I do, I suppose.”

“Can't argue with that.” She looked around again. The area was even rougher than before, this level had skeletons in cases, more odds and ends stacked around, and walls barely touched up from the raw dirt and rock that was normally underground. But still the path continued, and so too did our heroes. They went down yet another set of stairs but Aerith gave a gasp of surprise.

“Look!” She pointed with her free hand.

“I don't see anything.”

“Right, sorry, stupid of me,” she admitted. “It's those little motes, that I saw at the bank. They're drawing me forward, come on.”

The pair ended up at a circular room, this one finished, with columns holding it up and a strange symbol on the wall. Two triangles with an eye in the center, one pointing up and one pointing down, with a circle behind the whole thing.

“Never saw that symbol before,” Professor Fig told her. “What about the magic?”

“Right at the top of the stairs here,” she told him. “I'm not going to touch it, but it's right before me.”

“Describe it?”

“It's like water, bubbling up out of a crack in the ground. But the water is light, it's shining, shimmering-”

“Splendid,” he breathed.

“Er, yes. Anything else?”

“Down those stairs seems to be an odd archway. But it's in the center of the chamber, it doesn't lead anywhere.”

“So this is a dead end?”

“It seems that way. What did you do to the other source of magic you encountered before?”

“Oh, I kinda poked it with my wand?” *My borrowed wand. If it absorbed something, well, I hope the next user of it enjoys the boost or whatever.*

“Why not try that here?”

“Sure thing.” She did, and something strange happened. The magic swelled, swirling around her, and then suddenly it was gone. “It’s gone. Was it not really bubbling up from below?”

“We have more important concerns,” he told her. “Look.”

Looking up she noticed quite a change in the environment. The flat stone disks around the parameter now had wispy blue flames in them, and the archway down the stairs now had stairs leading further into the darkness connected to it.

“Has it simply revealed the truth of what is already there, or does this hole in the air lead somewhere else entirely?” Professor Fig mused. He was down on the ground, feeling around the base on both sides of the arch.

“Is there magic to, like, draw a circle in the air and step through it someplace else?” she asked.

“That would be far more convenient than any other method of travel wizards have at their disposal. Sadly, no, I’ve never heard of anything like that.”

“Are we going through it?”

“No sense being timid now! Come on!”

*Not even a little? Is this permanent? I didn’t do a spell, I just poked that glob of magic over there. Maybe the spell was cast before, contained in that blob, and I just let it out. Or it covered the spell and removing it was the final piece to finish casting it? I should have Professor Fig stick it with his wand, if we see another, see what happens there. Maybe it would give him the ability to see it too? Is that how I got the ability? I ran into a blob and-*

“Are you coming?”

“Yes, yes, of course!” She hurried through the arch expecting to feel something, but no, it was just like passing through a doorway. The pair continued downwards.

The stairs descended quite a ways, curving right, leading to a cave with a finished ceiling. There was a design worked in gold on it, but the walls were rough and crumbling. Moving forward though they came to a façade worked in marble, just like what she saw at the bank. There was an ornate door in front of them, with braziers full of fire on each side. But what caught Aerith’s attention was a wooden chest sitting just to the left of the opening of the fancy area. She looked it over for traps, can never be too careful, and popped it open.

“A robe?” she exclaimed, pulling it out. “What’s a robe doing in a chest sealed away from the world for hundreds of years?”

“It’s a nice robe,” Professor Fig admitted, “look like it would fit you.”

“How is it not decayed to nothing? Did they put an enchantment on the chest to preserve it? Does it have special properties? Should I put it on right now? Do you think it’s needed for some kind of challenge we’ll run into?”

“Try it, see if you feel anything,” he suggested.

Aerith took off her belt, set it nearby so she could grab her wand quickly if something came at them, and put her school robe into the book. She set the robe around her shoulders, and put the belt back on.

“Well?”

“It’s a robe,” she told him. “I don’t feel anything.” *It’s not trying to strangle me, so that’s a plus.*

“How strange. Let’s take a look at the door.”

“Right.”

They found the door to be unlocked, and carefully pushed it open.

“Look at this!” he breathed, pushing it all the way open. Aerith came in behind him, the chamber they were now was huge. Mist obscured exactly how big, but she was still able to get a sense of it.

“Is that a waterfall in the distance?” she asked, pointing to the left.

“You know, I believe it is. Where in the world have we gone to?”

The two looked at each other in confusion, but neither had any answers. He motioned her to follow him and moved forward. “Don’t slip, I have no idea how deep this is but I don’t have a broom to save you if you fall off.”

Aerith carefully walked over to the edge and looked down. “I can’t see any bottom.” She moved back. “Let’s keep going.”

The walls here had thick roots growing through them, or at least something root like. It wasn’t moving, which she was thankful for, but it still gave the place an unsettling vibe. They came to a gap, and both stood there wondering what to do now.

“No water to pull up this time,” she remarked, looking over the edge.

“What’s this?”

“Never mind. How do we cross? You send me flying with Dupulso and I bring you across with Accio?”

“Let’s think a moment before trying anything we might regret. Reparo!”

Nothing happened.

“So it’s not broken, then. There’s no magic traces here?”

She shook her head.

“Crud. I don’t see anything for it. Wait here a moment.” He jogged back towards the way they came from, and Aerith looked around. She heard him using spells off in the other chamber, and came back floating what looked like a block of stone. Four sides were smooth as can be, the “back” looked like it had been ripped out. “Made us a floating platform. You get on, and I’ll float you across. You do know Wingardium Leviosa, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Good. Once you’re across you can send it back for me. Pity you can’t use the spell so close to yourself, Wizards could simply fly on platforms instead of brooms.”

“What do you have against the broom industry?” she asked with a grin. She climbed onto the block, holding on for dear life. It bobbed a bit but held.

“Ready?”

“Not really, but go ahead.”

“Right.” He sent her across no problem.

Now it was her turn, as she hopped off he ended the spell and the stone crashed to the floor. She picked it up, swinging it around trying to get a feel for it. It lurched and tumbled like she was drunk. *What is this, inverted controls or something?*

“I thought you said you knew the spell?” Professor Fig yelled across the gap.

“It’s moving, isn’t it?” She yelled back. “You should have seen my first attempt,” *my only attempt, mind you*, “at that ball summoning game. One second!” She concentrated, sliding a new repeat point into her mind. “Okay, if you fall I’ll just repeat and we can try something else.”

“Ah yes, that ability of yours could come in handy should I, er, expire here. I trust you!”

*No reason you should.* Aerith carefully floated it back across, letting him get on, and then carefully floated it in one direction. He made it. “See, nothing to it.”

“We’ll have to work on your control,” he told her. “You’ve got power to spare, that much is obvious. But one day you may need both.”

“Agreed.”

They continued on, Professor Fig taking over levitation duty of the rock so Aerith didn't accidentally sweep them off the path, and opened another door. Then quickly shut it again when they saw what was inside.

"Are those the stone soldiers you spoke of?"

"Yes. I can probably use Bombarda now, to break them more easily."

He shook his head. "No need for that. Follow my lead." He went invisible, so she did too. Cracking the door open he crept through it, and she followed. It was similar to the last chamber, a long bridge like center part that fell into nothingness on either side. She could barely see where he was in the gloom and with the charm going, but as she knew he was there she knew where to look. He crept forward to stand in front of one of the statues. "Levioso!" he cast, raising it into the air. He followed it up with "Depulso!" It shot away from them, vanishing into the darkness below. The others (there were four total) started standing up.

*I see!* She followed his lead, floating and then blasting the nearest statue into the void.

"And I'll show you something else," Professor Fig told her, grabbing the stone chunk from where he had left it. He swung it around, smashing it into the statue which staggered back. He then simply pushed it back over the edge.

"As I don't have one, I'll just- look out!" Her statue jumped high in the air, much higher than it should have been able to, and came crashing down where they had been a second ago. "Levioso!" she cried. She then ran to the edge. "Accio!" And another statue went into the void.

"Well done!" he praised. "That's the way to do it!"

"That's partly how I won my duel in class," she explained. "I see what you're going for. Don't get into a protracted fight with something, just get rid of it." *Especiallly when you are clearly outnumbered. Something will come at you from behind. Even if I know that, hard to attack in two directions with only one wand.*

"Exactly. Come on, there must really be something worth protecting down here!"

There was another section of bridge through the next door, with even more statues this time, but they worked as a team so one person levitated and one person shoved. As wands didn't like doing the same spell too rapidly in succession, this let them alternate and sweep the statues away methodically. Past that were more chests, where Aerith picked up a hat on one side, and 52 gold on the other.

"Typical party etiquette is to split treasure found," Professor Fig told her with a grin, "but you can keep the gold and the hat. I don't think it would look good on me."

"Thanks."

They had to use the floating platform trick another time, and finally they were through to their goal. A large chamber with a birdbath in the center, and a book floating above it.

"Another bird bath?" Aerith questioned. "What are they doing here?"

"Bird- Oh!" he laughed. "No, no, but I can see the resemblance. This is the Pensieve I told you about. The memories need a bowl, they are liquid as I said."

"Oh. You don't think..."

Suddenly, as they got closer, the book opened, and a silvery liquid ran out of the pages into the basin. *Are there pages missing? Don't tell me I have two books with missing pages to deal with now.*

"I do!" he told her. "I think we are going to see the next chapter of the story. Or wait, the chapter I saw was building the room you saw, maybe that's the end of the story. Perhaps this will be the beginning?"

"Is it safe?"

"You can't be caught in memories," he told her. "It's perfectly safe. Take the book and secure it, we'll deal with that later. It will only take a second, we won't be attacked in the time we're in the memories. It may feel like a long time but just remember that your body is back here, and it's fine."

“Right.” Aerith grabbed it, feeling weight return to it once it wasn’t over the bowl any more. She sucked it into her book.

“Great. Now, do as I do.”

“As you do?”

“As you do, but as I do.”

“As I do, but as you do!”

“Here we go.” He put his face into the basin.

*Oh boy. Bobbing for apples this is not.* She stuck her face in.

She was transported to a small village, one that was on the brink of ruin by the looks of it. The ground was dry and cracked, the trees dying. She was standing near a family outside, a man, a boy with a crutch we’ll call “Tim” and a slightly older girl. The girl brought up a bucket from a well but nothing came up. Dust blew across the withered grass, and the boy Tim began to cough. He was clearly sick. The family looked up so her gaze went to four well dressed people high above on a cliff. Three wizards, one witch. They had a short discussion and started waving their wands around. Instantly, the scene changed. Rain started to fall. The trees’ leaves came back. The grass and flowers started to spout. As far as she could see, the four used magic to bring the land back to life. The family gazed up in wonder, and the lead man nodded down to them. Then they turned and left. The boy continued to cough, and the father of the lad, we’ll call him “Bob” pounded him on the back and asked if he was okay. The girl looked concerned.

The scene changed. They were in an office, the same four, discussing something. A girl ran into the room, seemingly delighted to see them. It was the same girl, now several years older. The four discussed the fact she was entering Hogwarts as a fifth year, same as one of the men. And she could see magic, same as him. *And the same as me. Why this pattern? It doesn’t make any sense.* The lady there said that this magic must be wielded by a select few, making Aerith frown not that she could see herself. The scene ended, and both jerked out of the bowl.

They stood staring at each other for a moment, absorbing what they had seen.

“Well, the girl is clearly going to be evil,” Aerith finally said.

“What? Why do you say that?” he asked.

“Think about it. That little girl saw four people perform a miracle. They made it rain, brought their village back to life. Then left without saying a word. Mark my words, that little boy died anyway. She vowed revenge on them, and was overjoyed to get her letter to learn magic. There she met those four again. Biding her time now, she learned all she could and then murdered them for her brother, who they didn’t bother to save that day. You think they didn’t have potions back in those days? Healers? Ha! They did. But they didn’t care about him. They cared more about the plants than her sick kin. Mark my words, she vowed revenge for their apathy that day.”

“Well you do have a good imagination,” he admitted. “And I’m not saying that didn’t happen, we need to know more. Much more. But did you catch what the witch said at the end?”

“Yes, that this magic must be used by a select few. What does that even mean? The universe selected me to use magic, right? No one woke me up one day and asked, hey, would you like to use magic? No, it just happened. I didn’t like them. Yeah, they did some good there but then just left? Didn’t see if the people there needed help? They made it rain, yes, but how much rain would it take to fill up that well? Days and days of it. Those people were still thirsty for days, if it even rained that long. That strikes me as very cold. And the way they spoke to the girl, it just didn’t sit right with me. Who did those four think they were, anyway?”

“Hogwarts professors, at some time in the past,” he mused. “We can find out more about them, now that I’ve seen them. Come on, we should check this chamber of other clues and then head back.”

So they looked around, but other things were nagging at Aerith. *Two people were born at roughly the same time that could see this strange magic as I do. Sure, one was quite old and one was young but they were both alive together. But it's been hundreds of years. Why no one in the intervening time? What triggered my being able to see it? Or are many people that can see it born, and these two just happened to run into each other? So many questions, and the answers are scattered across these stupid memory basins. Just give us the full story now, I mean come on! They did a lot of work to set all this up, and for what? Maybe the book will have some answers...*

## Chapter 14

### Learning Their Lesson

When: After coming back from the library

Where: Professor Fig's office

The two returned to Professor Fig's office carrying the book, after of course returning the key to the librarian. They had found no more clues in the strange chamber, nor did they find any way of turning the archway "off" now that it had been activated. Professor Fig had a hushed conversation with the Librarian to caution people about going through it, as it was quite possible to tumble into the abyss and never be heard from again. She said she had always wondered what that archway was about but wasn't sure now if she was pleased to know the answer.

"I'll get someone from the ministry here, they'll want to study the effect, and see if can be duplicated. The room will have to be sealed off until then, Heaven knows the students here are quite adept at getting into places they shouldn't be, including the restricted section. Maybe I should use two locks on the door..."

"Perhaps leave our names out of it?" Professor Fig pleaded. "Simply say you were stowing something down there and noticed it was opened. No need to involve our names in it."

"If you say so."

Now back at the office the two sat down and carefully paged through the book. It seemed to contain a lot of magical formula, written passages, illustrations, but all quite incomprehensible to Aerith. They had pretty much gotten to the end, Professor Fig slowing from his frantic pace at the beginning, excitedly paging through like they had found an instruction manual for a working fission reactor or something.

"And no magic anywhere within the pages?" Professor Fig pressed her as they sat flipping through the last few pages.

"No sir. Nothing like that."

"And you're still just seeing the same things I am?" He had been pointing things out and making sure there wasn't some kind of ink used in the book only she could see.

"Yes, the same things. That's some kind of table with numbers and letters in rows and column."

"Good! At least I'll be able to study the pages without needing you to completely duplicate the book into a blank volume. Pity about the missing pages though."

"Yes, I wondered about that. They must have been torn out by whoever placed the book there."

"I agree, if someone had gotten into that chamber before us somehow, why only take these few middle pages? Strange though, that they were not recovered before the book was left for us to find. What could they have contained? Information even those that set this whole thing up didn't want you to have? Very odd, if so."

"Too bad there isn't some kind of time magic, that could simply take the book back to the time before the pages were ripped out."

"Indeed. I did once hear rumors about a glowing, green stone, a "time stone" if you will that could do that very thing. Just stories though. Anyway, it's getting late. You should be getting back to your dorm. You must have homework to do."

Aerith sighed a great sigh. “Yes, I suppose so. Not that I have the background information for half of what we discuss in class. Why they decided I should join the student population instead of just hiring a private tutor for me... I feel like I’m just going to get further and further behind.”

“And running around the halls with me hasn’t helped. Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s fine. We need to solve this mystery. It’s important.”

“Agreed. Let me know if you need any tutoring, I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow, Professor. Have fun with the book.”

“I will! See you later.”

She made it to the door. “Oh, Aerith?”

“Yes, professor?” She half turned back to him.

“Thank you. For choosing the world *with* George in it. I know you were probably just saving yourself, but still, everyone came out of that alive, and he’s none the wiser. I do appreciate it, as I’m sure his wife and children do.”

*So I didn’t just save a man, I saved a father and a husband. Good!* “Of course. Don’t worry, with me around, know that I will always strive for the perfect possible future.”

Aerith, her wand lit up to beat back the darkness, made her way up to the entrance to her dorm. It was fairly late, both had been engrossed in the book but at least Professor Fig had something sent up from the kitchen so they hadn’t missed dinner. She was thinking about what homework she could do before she needed to be in bed when a boy stepped out in front of her.

“Hey, Aerith,” he greeted her.

“Oh, hi!” *It’s that boy that I dueled in class. What was his name? Something forgettable, that’s what you are. So forgettable, though near or far. Like the stench of manure that clings to me, where am I going with this?*

“I was starting to get worried. Your friends didn’t know where you were, but someone said they saw you leaving with Professor Fig. He’s not... Taking advantage of you, is he?”

*Oh, that’s actually kind of sweet. Was he worried about me?* She shook her head. “Not in that way, anyway. What I mean is, no, I mean he needs my eyes-” *How can I tell him that yes, Professor Fig is taking advantage of me because I can see this weird magic he needs to complete his wife’s work, but I’m doing it voluntarily?*

“Never mind. Don’t actually care. I’m here about crossed wands.”

*Okay, so not so sweet after all.* “Crossed- that so called club you were talking about? What about it?” *Didn’t Professor Hecat say she was going to shut that down?*

“Yes, that. It’s strange, isn’t it? How I told you about it, and suddenly she’s announcing she’s keeping an eye on the area and we better not be having unsanctioned duels anymore. What I want to know is, are you responsible for that?”

She laughed. “Oh boy, Professor Hecat already knew about it. She too tried to make me participate. I simply reminded her how dangerous that could be, and she agreed that maybe letting it go on was too dangerous. So did I have something to do with it? Indirectly, maybe.”

“Don’t try to weasel out of it, did you or did you not get us shut down?”

She sighed. “Look, get out of my way. It’s been a long day and I’ve been more than polite to you. I have stuff to do tonight. If you’re going to do things against school rules, expect to get caught. End of story. Good night.”

She tried to step around him, but he put himself in her way. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Oh really?” Her eyes narrowed. Suddenly, her danger sense went off, and she realized she was under attack from behind. Her wand was already out, and she knew she could block the attack. “Protego!” A red bolt smashed into her shield and bounced off, allowing her to spin. She knew exactly where her attacker was. “Stupify!” she cast, and the surprised boy she was looking at was blasted backwards, stunned.

“How did you- Stupify!” cast Sebastian, but this was no more effective than the first one, as she again raised her shield, bouncing it off. She followed it up this time with “Accio” grabbing his wand out of the air as it was pulled towards her.

“Accio!” said the other boy, and Aerith found out that a winning strategy can sometimes be used against you. However, she had prepared for such an eventuality, unlike at least the one moron she was facing who had been there to see her develop the strategy. Her wand, though ripped out of her hand as specified by the spell, couldn’t actually go anywhere because of the strap. It just wiggled in the air trying to get to the boy. Casting with her off hand now, and being sure to reverse the wand motion which wasn’t easy, she used Sebastian’s wand for her next “Accio” which flipped the other boy’s wand into her hand. She quickly stepped back, transferring both stolen wands into her left hand and flipping her own wand up into her right.

“That ends that rather neatly, don’t you think?” she asked sweetly.

“Sebastian, grab her!” cried the other boy.

“Ah ah ah,” Aerith cautioned, laying both wands against her knee and dropping her own wand again so she could grab them in both hands. “You take one step near me and so help me God I will break these wands right now!”

“Wait, wait!” cried Sebastian, taking a step back himself. He held his hands up. “Don’t do that!”

“Over by your friend, nice and slow,” she told him. She backed up, giving him plenty of room. With a sullen look on his face he complied, heading that way.

“Good. You might just get these back,” she told them when he was far enough away. She grabbed her own wand up again and pointed it at them, looking at them with fury in her eyes. “Keep moving.”

“Wha- what are you going to do?” asked the other boy.

“I’m sure Professor Weasley will be *thrilled* to hear you just attacked me in the hall. Let’s go pay her a little visit.”

“Come on, we can take her!” whispered the one boy.

“Without wands? Are you nuts? I don’t want her to Bombarda me. Or break my wand,” he whispered back.

“You’re not moving!” Aerith told them sweetly. “How about we test the fire resistance of these wands?” She pointed her wand at them. “Incend-”

“Okay, okay! We’re going!” Sebastian told her quickly, heading down the hall.

The trio headed to Professor Weasley’s office, the two boys in front with their arms raised, Aerith covering them from behind.

“You know, all you had to do was ask,” she told them. “As Professor Hecat already knew about it, and didn’t stop it at first, if you had just *asked* her for official club space and for her to oversee the duels, she probably would have. She seems to love violence for some reason.”

“Huh, yeah she probably would have,” Sebastian admitted.

“Little late for that now,” the other boy grumbled.

“Not my problem!” she told them lightly. *Dummies.*

She made them knock and enter first, then came in behind them. Professor Weasley put her quill away and raised her eyebrows as Aerith slammed their wands down on her desk.

“These two attacked me in the hall just a moment ago,” she spat. “Because of their *precious* dueling club. I guess they forgot I completely spanked what’s his name here in class, three times I might add, and thought attacking me from behind would work. How did that work out for you, by the way?”

“Is this true?” Professor Weasley asked the boys.

“I, uh, well, the thing is-” they began.

“Oh yes, regale us with the tale of how you were just minding your own business in the hall and I attacked you out of the blue and took your wands and brought you here. See how that goes for you.”

“Aerith...” Professor Weasley warned.

“What? I’m tired of it. In the last week I’ve been attacked by a dragon, a troll, three dozen statues, and now I have to deal with this? I should be able to walk from a classroom to my dorm room without having to worry about being attacked by my own classmates!”

“Dragon?” she asked.

“Statues?” asked the one boy.

“What?” *Oh crap, I’m more rattled than I thought. Take a breath, Aerith.* “Never mind, it’s a long story. Answer the question, did you attack me or not!”

“I told you it was a bad idea,” the other boy said to Sebastian.

“What? I told you it was a bad idea!” He shoved the other boy.

“You suggested it!” He shoved back.

“No I didn’t-”

“Boys!” Professor Weasley shouted, slamming a hand on the desk. They both jumped. “So I take it the answer is yes.”

“Yes, Professor,” both said, looking down.

“And what exactly was your plan, after you attacked her, humm? Have a little fun, perhaps?” She grabbed up both wands and pointed them at the crotches of the two boys.

“No!” both insisted, covering themselves.

“We were just, I wanted to... Uh...” Sebastian tried.

“You didn’t even think that through?” Aerith gasped. “You would have hit me with Stupefy, from behind, like a coward, and you had no plan for what to do with me? What did you *think* was going to happen? I don’t believe this. I mean you’re not Ravenclaw but put a *little* effort in. I’m insulted!”

“How did you know I was there?” asked the boy. “I was disillusioned, you couldn’t have heard me. But you blocked my spell even without looking, then spun and looked right at me. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

She smirked. “Maybe you’re just not as stealthy as you think.” *Thank you, danger sense.*

“So you admit to ganging up on her, one of you hid and attacked her from behind?”

“Yes.”

“This one,” she pointed to Sebastian, “was waiting for me by the dorm entrance. He was talking but clearly that was just a distraction.”

“If you didn’t have anything to do with it, we would have let you go,” he replied sullenly.

“Sure, sure. This one,” she pointed to the other boy, “attacked me from behind. I shielded it, got his wand away from him, then took the other wand with his wand.”

“Wait, you used someone else’s wand, in your other hand, and got a spell off?” Professor Weasley looked impressed and surprised, looking down at her left hand and back to Aerith.

“It was pretty amazing,” she admitted. “Too bad there’s no magic to look through time, so I could see how amazing I was over and over again...”

She cleared her throat. “Yes, well, be that as it may. You’ve admitted to attacking this girl, so your punishment shall be three fold.” She stuck the wands in her desk door. “As we take a fairly dim view of students attacking each other in the halls. One, you will serve detention for one month. Two, I will be writing to your parents, Mr. Brattlebly, and your guardian, Mr. Sallow.” Naturally both boys started to protest, but she glared them down again. “And third, as you have no idea what a wand is for, I will be keeping them for the rest of the school year.” That really set them off, and she waited patiently for them to finish, and they fell into silence again. “As you must still learn and practice your wand work, you will be given them before any class in practical magic, and surrender them at the end of that class. Is that clear?”

Both boys nodded.

"I said, is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor Weasley."

"Good. Now get out of my sight. And Mr. Sallow, if I hear you have even gone *near* the restricted section for the rest of your time here, you will be *expelled*. This incident is just the latest from you and the school year has just begun! You will not step out of line again. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Good. You are dismissed."

The two boys shot an angry glance at Aerith but left. Professor Weasley dropped into her chair. "My goodness, I hate being a disciplinarian," she sighed. "All I wanted to do was teach. Was that so much to- You are all right, aren't you dear?"

"I'm fine. Even two against one, they really had no chance. I'm just glad I didn't have to hurt them."

"Yes... For a girl that's only had a few days of classes you certainly seem capable." She leaned forward, her head resting on her chin. "There's more to you than meets the eye, isn't there? Professor Fig says you have a natural talent for magic, but clearly it's something more."

"I'm just a hard worker, that's all," she replied modestly. *And really, that's all it is. Maybe my magic is stronger for some reason but I had to work just as hard as anyone else would to learn the spells I know. I just was able to do it over the same day, so it looks to the outside observer I'm doing it really fast.*

"I see. Well, wait a moment so you can be sure those boys won't make trouble for you and you can head back to your dorm." She went back to her writing, but then looked up again. "Do you want me to escort you?"

She shook her head. "That would imply that I was afraid, and I'm not going to let fear rule my life. If they are stupid enough to attack me a second time, using borrowed wands or without, they'll regret it."

She looked Aerith over a moment. "I think you even mean it. How interesting. You're going to be one to watch as you get older, aren't you?"

"Implying I'm not now?"

Both chuckled.

Aerith was about to leave, but turned back again. "Professor?"

"Yes?"

"That boy. Sallow?"

"Sebastian? What about him?"

"Is his sister really ill?"

"That's the excuse he uses for poking around the forbidden books, yes. Come to think of it, his sister Anne should be a fifth year, same as you. She was exempted from classes while they tried to cure her. So I would have to say... Yes, now I remember. It happened just before school started. I think she was struck by some kind of curse. I don't know the details, but she is unable to return to classes. But if our healers can't do anything, a boy still in school isn't going to. Why?"

*Too far back to go, and not specific enough. How would I even get here in time to prevent it? Sorry, Anne.* "I just wondered, I heard a rumor, but... Does she live around here?"

"Way down in Feldcroft. Miles from here."

"But accessible with the Floo, correct?"

"I suppose."

"May I have permission to visit her over the weekend? I'll go with my friends again, if you don't want me going alone."

"Her brother just got done attacking you, and you want to visit his sister in the spirit of good will?"

"If she should be a fifth year and now she's stuck at home she must be very lonely. If she's up to it I'd like to see if I could cheer her up a little." *Maybe this Sebastian isn't a bad guy, but is under a lot of stress because he's worried about his sister. Doesn't justify attacking me, but someone that should be in my own class deserves at least one visit from someone, right? What if she's like that Gobstones girl, and doesn't have any friends of her own to visit? That would be awful!*

"I say," said the professor, pausing a moment. "You don't do things by half measures, do you?"

"Just because I want to visit someone who is sick?" *And who knows, maybe my special vision will tell me something. Or I'll discover I have another power, to heal curses or something. Who knows with me at this point?*

"Most wouldn't even- bah, here I am talking about 'most people.' Sure, you may visit her over the weekend, with your friends. I'll get her name and address for you before then."

"Thank you, professor!"

"Just don't stay too long, you'll have plenty of homework to do by the weekend!"

"I won't!" *And I can do homework for days if I need to, all in a single hour. Well, not if it's like writing reports or something, I still need time to do the writing. If only I could take things back with me...*

Aerith left the office, hardly even glancing around to make sure the two boys weren't laying in wait. She still had her wand out, and lit up, because she wasn't stupid. But this time she made it back to her dorm without incident.

"There you are," Jo exclaimed, popping up as she opened the door. "We were about to send out a search party!"

"No need, I'm fine," she assured them.

"What happened?" Tina asked. "After class you vanished."

"Sorry about that, girls. I'm just a busy person, that's all. Say, do you all know an Anne Sallow?"

"Know her, of course," Elle laughed. "We debated calling you New Anne but it was voted down. How do you think you got this room?"

"Wait, no way! You mean..." She pointed to her bunk.

The other girls nodded. "You replaced her," Mary went on. "We didn't want to mention it because you might feel bad. But as you've brought it up yourself it's fine. No one would tell us anything, but Sebastian said she was cursed or something?"

"What are the odds? Well, anyway, we're going to visit her this weekend. I got permission."

"Aerith, really?" Mary continued, a huge smile on her face. "Oh my gosh, you're the best! We didn't get permission when we asked. I guess *someone* is a teacher's pet or something."

"Really! Gather up anybody else that might want to come. We'll hope the weather is good Saturday but Sunday is okay too. We'll go surprise her, hopefully cheer her up."

"You're a miracle worker!" Sabrina told her.

Aerith just grinned. *They have no idea.*

## Chapter 15

Cries

When: The next day

Where: Around the castle, no place special

With a trip outside the castle to now look forward to, this was sure to make the rest of the week drag. Professor Fig was deep in the book, Sebastian was looking daggers at Aerith in class not that she cared, and her friends told her a few more girls were in for the visit to Anne on the weekend. Naturally she instructed them all not to tell Sebastian. He could twist in the wind for all she cared, for what he had done. People had already noticed he didn't have his wand, but she wasn't about to make his life even more miserable by crowing about it. *That's all I can do for you, dummy. Hope it's enough.*

She walked into her first Herbology lesson and was greeted by a very cheerful witch that introduced herself as Professor Garlick. *A little on the nose, isn't it? What in the world?* She was wearing a green hat decorated with many flowers, and her hair, in two braids that hung down over her shoulders, was almost as long as Aerith's. She was handing out cotton balls and had a line of pots ready to go. For the sake of those who had forgotten, and Aerith, she explained that today's lesson would be about Mandrakes, the screaming plant. Aerith learned several facts about them:

- 1) They could scream, when fully grown, loud enough to kill a person
- 2) At this age they would simply knock you out for hours, and you would need special treatment because your eardrums would be blasted out of your head
- 3) They needed to be placed into bigger pots
- 4) Okay go!

"Wait!" shouted Aerith as everyone was putting cotton in their ears. She was waving her hands and looking panic stricken. "Please. I have many questions! So, so many questions about all this."

"Of course!" Professor Garlick told her. "Ask away!"

"Okay, first. You've just gone on about how dangerous their cry is, but-" And here she skipped out to the door, stuck her head out, looked around, nodded in a satisfied way, and came back in. "Yes, as I thought. No warning signs out there. What if we yank these things up just as someone is opening the door? They'll get the full force of the cry and maybe die. I mean we're talking about-" she did a quick count, "twenty of them in this tiny space. That has to be loud enough to equal one adult plant, correct?"

"That's not a bad point," she admitted. "Maybe I should put up some signs."

"Question two relates to that. Shouldn't we take turns pulling them out? This tiny bit of cotton isn't going to protect us from the cries of so many, is it? One at a time, we may stand a chance."

"They are pretty loud," she admitted.

*Yes, loud enough to kill someone, you just said that! Look how enclosed this place is, do you not know how sound works? Why are we doing this in an enclosed place and not out in a field somewhere, warnings signs all over the place? But is being exposed again and again better or worse than taking one really loud blast? I'm no doctor...* "Third, why did you use the tiny pot to begin with? If you knew

they would outgrow the tiny pot, why not just use the bigger pot right from the start? Did you not *have* the bigger pots to begin with?"

"No, no we did," she admitted, looking a little haunted.

"Okay? And now for my final question, isn't there such thing as a silencing charm? Why can't we put something like that on the plant? I can see the leaves, so clearly I could use such a charm on the thing before pulling it up. If they are somehow resistant, how about building a special box, made of metal on," she counted up, "four sides, and glass on one side, with some holes in it for our hands. We could put both pots in there, and if it was big enough, just work with the plant from the inside. Make the glass unbreakable just in case, put the silence charm on the box, and you've got a perfectly safe workstation to transplant all the Mandrake you want, one at a time. I mean really, are you taking our safety seriously at all here?" She wiggled the cotton at the professor. *Whoops, that came out a bit too harsh, I think that one got away from me.*

Professor Garlick got a horrified look on her face and ran out of the room.

"Was she crying?" one girl asked.

"Oh, nicely done," Sebastian told Aerith. "Are you trying to ruin everyone's life here, one person at a time? I'll go make sure she's okay."

"But I'm not, I just... I wanted to be sure... she couldn't possibly want us to do something so dangerous as this..."

"Yeah, yeah." He scowled at her as he went past, leaving the classroom in silence. "Jerk."

"You made Professor Garlick cry," another girl said. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"She's a terrible person!" another boy said.

"Who, Professor Garlick? But she's so nice, and she always smells like flowers, and-"

"No, Aerith!"

"Yeah, down with Aerith! Stop being mean to Professor Garlick!"

"I wasn't!" she insisted.

"Then why did she leave?"

"Look, it's not, I just... I'll go and apologize to her, okay!?" She ran out too. *I could go back, not say those things, or try to say them in a different way. But the point remains, her methods are a bit questionable.*

She didn't have to go far, and in fact she followed the sound of crying, making her feel terrible. Sebastian was crouched down next to her, she was squished up into a ball, and looked up as she skidded to a halt.

"Oh, there she is. Think of some other school regulation she broke, come to pour salt into the wound?" he asked sarcastically.

"Get lost, Sebastian," she told him. "You got *exactly* what you deserved for what you did. In fact you probably got off easily. Do that sort of thing as an adult and it's prison time, at the very least. Be thankful you learned the lesson early. Don't take your frustration with yourself out on me." She turned to the ball of sadness before her. "Professor Garlick? Look, I'm sorry about what I said, I was a bit harsh. I didn't mean it to be."

"She did," Sebastian countered. "She's aiming for top safety officer here at the school. Hasn't been here a week but you step a toe out of line-"

"Sebastian," she said, glaring at him. "Leave. Now."

"Will you be okay?" he asked Professor Garlick. She sniffled and nodded.

"Okay. I'm only leaving because you said you'll be okay, not because she intimidated me or anything like that." He glared at her again as he got up and went past her.

Aerith knelt down in front of her, and took her hands. "I am really sorry about this. I do want everyone to be safe, it's true, but that's no excuse for-"

"It's not that," she managed, looking up. "You were right. I put student's lives at risk. Me! What if the headmaster had popped in to see how class was doing right as you pulled the Mandrake out? He

could have died, and it would be my fault. I should have put up signs, big ones, out in the hall and near the door. ‘Do not open! Mandrake screams possible at any time.’ How hard would that have been? I was just so excited to see everyone back, I didn’t even think of such a thing. My goodness, how have we been lucky enough so far to have *never* had that happen? Oh sure, the odd hand lost, the odd foot chomped, you sort of expect that kind of thing. I haven’t taught here long but if I got someone killed... You can’t take that back.”

*Well I admit most can’t but hang on- The odd what now? Lost hand? Are you really taking safety seriously or not?* “Hey, it’s okay, nothing happened, and nothing will happen. You’re thinking about it now, right?” She nodded sadly. “So you see, no harm done. Let’s maybe review the silencing charm, and everything will be fine.”

She sniffed again. “Students wouldn’t be able to do a strong enough silencing charm on Mandrakes, they’re too loud. But I bet we could build that box you talked about.”

“See, that’s the way! And if you want to give me detention or something for making you cry, I guess that’s fine. You can do it in front of everyone, that should make you feel better, right?”

“I’m not crying, you’re crying!”

It was true, there was a tear coming down Aerith’s cheek. “I just feel really bad about making you feel so bad. I really didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay.” She uncurled herself and both stood up, Aerith dropping her hands as she got out a handkerchief and blew her nose. “Emotions are a little high right now, always are at the start of the year. I don’t blame you.”

“So no detention?”

“I’ll think about it,” she said with a grin. “Maybe I’ll make you fertilize all the plants. By hand. You know what we use, don’t you?”

“Er, I have a fairly good idea?” She made a face. *I would be happy to do it anyway, to make it up to you.*

“Try not to make me cry the rest of class and we’ll be good.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Let’s go then.” She squared her shoulders and marched back into the room. “Right, change of plans everyone. Let’s scrounge around here for some material to make some boxes. Here’s the size of the pot we’re going to use, it has to be big enough to hold both this pot and the small one. Well, greenhouse area extends to several buildings let’s go! Look around, there must be something we can use!”

And so class turned into an impromptu shop class, with bits and bobs being used to create some boxes, and everyone took turns casting a silence charm on it. Aerith at least learned the wand motion for it, but didn’t go back time and again, that really would have been suspicious. Not that there was any visible change to the boxes when it was cast. They then, still with the cotton in their ears, carefully pulled a plant at a time out, making sure the cry was muffled by the box, and finished the lesson with all of them replanted.

*Whew.*

Next up was potions class, which one would think would be the most straightforward. Put ingredients into pot, stir pot, collect potion. But it wasn’t quite as cut and dried as all that.

“I have some questions about all this,” Aerith asked, raising her hand after Professor Black, the guy with facial scars and a limp, said to get going with their healing potion. Which he called a Wiggenweld’s potion. After the creator, Mr. Wiggenweld. Not a Wiggenweld potion, a Wiggenweld’s potion. A Wiggenweld potion would be nonsensical and thus why it was referred to, by most, as simply

a healing potion. If you wanted to pay homage to the creator, he explained, go ahead and call it a Wigenweld's potion, but expect some funny looks as you did so.

"Oh, trying to make him cry as well?" Sebastian asked her. "This should be good."

"I wasn't trying to make her cry, *Sebastian*. I was simply pointing out a few areas where I felt we could be more cautious- never mind. I'm asking about potions!"

"And as this is a potions class," Professor Sharp told her with a ghost of a grin, "I'll allow them."

"Thank you. First, what is a pinch?"

"You sort of do this?" He pinched his fingers together to demonstrate and the class laughed.

"I'm serious!" she insisted, looking around. "That's the problem right here. Look at the size of his hands and look at the size of mine. Will a 'pinch' of powdered leaves taken by my hand be the same as taken by his? Wouldn't a more precise measurement, such as a number of grams, be better? Or at least some portion of a tablespoon."

"This potion doesn't need such an exact measurement as that, but yes, other potions do require more precise measurements and will be called out as such. You need not worry about it for this one."

"But why?" she persisted. "Especially with a healing potion, one would want a standard potency. Doesn't the amount of ingredient determine that? And wouldn't you want potions of a different potency? If I had just been stabbed, for example, I would want a fast acting potion so my heart could keep beating. But if my leg had been crushed by a boulder I might want a slower acting potion so I could straighten the leg as it healed and... Sorry that may be a bad example."

"No, no, I take your point. The potion can't heal everything, no matter how potent. I'm the living proof of that. And the time between the injury and when you drink it certainly matters as well. In this case, a slightly greater or lesser amount of ingredient would hardly make a noticeable difference. It is strange, now that you mention it, but there you have it."

"But the ingredients do matter, right? I can't just use any leaves and any juice, *intending* to make a healing potion, and get a healing potion. Is all this adding and stirring some kind of ritual magic that simply imbues the liquid with, in this case, the power to heal?"

He shook his head. "No, ritual magic is something else entirely. The ingredients do matter."

"Ritual magic?" someone asked.

"That's a bit far afield, but quick enough to explain. Most magic is done in the moment." He swished his wand and a book jumped up into his hand. "You expend a small amount of magical energy, and some task is done by the spell." He put the book back. "It's a personal magic, affecting the world around the caster. But what if you want something longer lasting, affects a huge area, or something that can even survive the death of the caster? For that you need ritual magic. Most people don't bother, so there's usually not enough interest to support a full class here at Hogwarts, but it does exist. It's how we get things like the trace, or what was done to the elves."

"What was done to the elves?" someone else asked.

"Never mind, not relevant to the discussion. In any case, ritual magic takes on the order of hours, if not longer. With a spell if you get it wrong either nothing happens, or something happens. That something could be quite different from what you intended, if you get the incantation wrong."

*The books of a feather spell!*

"Ritual magic is more forgiving of error, over the long haul, but disastrous if you mess up too much. After all, you've gathered magical energies for hours and they have to go somewhere. But yes, potion making could be considered a branch of ritual magic. It is fairly ritualized, after all. With the stirring and such."

"Thank you for explaining," Aerith told him. "Do you mind if I get out a scale and measuring spoons? If other potions do require exacting amounts of ingredients, I would rather start practicing as though this one did, as well."

“You can do what you like. You’ll find such things in that cabinet over there.” He pointed. “Any other questions?”

“Ah, yes, if you don’t mind?”

“Go ahead. *Ravenclaws*,” he muttered.

“Just about potions in general. How much should we rely on them?”

“Rely?”

“I know, it seems an odd question for a person clearly knowledgeable enough about them to teach them, but unlike with magic, excuse me wand magic, as obviously this is magic as well.”

“Obviously.”

“I know I’ve cast a spell correctly because I see the result in front of me. I might not drink a potion for days or weeks after I make it. Heaven forbid I ever have to drink a healing potion, though I agree some should be handy just in case. How do I, the beginner, know I’ve done the potion correctly? There’s no way to test it. Now I could drink several healing potions in a row but if I were to rely on a potion to let me pass through walls or make me fireproof, it could end very easily in disaster.”

“You have a point, there’s no way to know absolutely if you’ve done a potion right. And be careful if you buy one, only buy from a reputable person or someone you can take revenge upon.” The class laughed. “After all, it could be a healing potion, or it could be some water they tinted green with some tea leaves. You don’t know.” There were nods around the room. “As for your question, if the ingredients you’ve used dissolve smoothly into the liquid and it seems about the right color and consistency, the potion will do something. That something is most likely to be the thing you made it to do. Now, are there cases where someone grabbed the wrong vial by accident and stumbled upon a new potion? Naturally! But if you mix the wrong things together they’ll usually just sit there so you know you have it wrong.”

“That’s what I wanted to know, thank you.”

“Anything... else?”

*Perhaps I shouldn’t push it.* “Just this, why don’t we get started?”

“Agreed. To your tables, everyone.”

Aerith measured out an exact quantity of both ingredients, choosing (and writing down) the smallest weight for her scale (so she could know what she tried and repeat the amount should it be adequate) and carefully dripping some of the juice from a bottle into a beaker, noting how much that was by pouring it into a teaspoon, and then pouring it from the spoon into the cauldron. *After all, you would never pour something that requires ‘drops’ right from a huge bottle of the stuff. As I see others doing, sigh. What if your hand slips and you dump in the whole bottle? At worst it’s a waste of material and... No at best it’s that, at worst the whole thing sets you on fire...* She then carefully stirred the mixture, using the breathing technique as she envisioned her magic flowing into the water. Back and forth she stirred, finally lifting the spoon from the potion and using the ladle to scoop it up and bottle it. Professor Sharp compared it to his.

“Color seems good, consistency seems the same. Well done, this is most likely a healing potion. You can follow simple direction, congratulations.”

“Ah, thank you.” *Why do I not feel as good about myself due to the way he put that.*

“If you would like to try your hand at the next potion in your book, I think you have enough time. And you were very exacting, so I suppose it is good practice for more advanced potions. Perhaps I should insist on measuring everything from the start.”

“I’d love to try another,” Aerith told him.

“Very well. I have some ingredients for it in my office. Read over what you need and go and get them.”

“Thank you.” She read it over. *Crushed eggshell, the contents of the egg lightly whipped, and the hairs from three different pelts. I think I can manage that.* She looked around, finding the door to his office and heading that way. She was intercepted.

“Hey, did I hear you have permission to go into Professor Sharp’s office?”

“Yes...” she answered slowly, not liking where this was going already.

“I’m Garreth Weasley, by the way. It’s Aerith, right? The troll killer?”

“That’s me.”

“Great, great. Look, I’m working on a little surprise for the class, I just need something, Professor Sharp is sure to have. Would you, maybe, consider just bringing it to me?”

She stared at him. “You want me to steal? From a professor? Are you insane?”

“Steal? No! No, no, no, well, sort of. It’s just a feather. They’re not expensive, I doubt he would even miss it!”

“That’s not the point. I don’t care if it was a sheet of parchment from his desk or a Knut that rolled under his chair. It’s his. Taking anything else from the office would be stealing. I can’t believe you’re even asking me this!”

“Yeah,” said Sebastian, walking up. “You’re wasting your time with this one. She wouldn’t bend over to pick up a Sickle in an empty field because the farmer that dropped it could come back for it.”

“Less talking, please!” Professor Sharp told them from his desk. Shouted, really.

“You know nothing about me,” Aerith hissed at him. “So please don’t go thinking you do.” She pushed past them and entered the office. *The nerve. Boys! I’ll never understand them. Stealing from-hello?* She looked around. On the desk was a pelt, and off to the side a small nest with a single egg. She looked around, there were the feathers that boy was probably talking about, *they are pretty*, but no other eggs or pelts. She gathered them up and went back to see him.

“Professor?” she began.

“What is it?” he almost managed not to sigh.

“There’s only one egg, and one pelt.” She held them up. “The potion calls for three of each.”

“Only one? Don’t be absurd. That’s really all you found in there?”

“Yes. I am an expert at counting to one.”

He snorted, levering himself out of the chair. “Let’s go take a look.”

*Oh, he doesn’t believe me. What a shock.*

He looked around the office but came up stumped. “I guess you’re right. I was sure I had more than that. Positive.” He looked around, but everyone seemed bent to their tasks. “Peeves, maybe? We’ll just have to make do. Your potion got a bit more complicated I’m afraid, but I think you’re up to it. Leave that stuff here.” She did as she was asked and he went out to the many jars he had lining the walls. Let’s see, egg shell, check. Here’s the powdered egg product, check.” He lifted two jars, appropriately labeled. “Hairs, here we are.” He nodded to a glass case with a top, that had various compartments in it with different colored fur. “You can carry that one.” She did, and he put the jars on her desk.

“As the egg has had the liquid removed to be dried, you’ll have to add it back. There’s a table in the back of the book on what ratios to use. I’ll give you ten house points if you can get it right.”

“Thank you, sir!”

Naturally, she did, and walked out of the class feeling fairly good about potion making. And for refusing that Weasley kid, who seemingly went ahead with his potion anyway, making it explode all over the place. Luckily no one was hurt, but where she walked out with two useful potions stuck in her book and 10 points for her house, he walked out having lost points for his. *Boys!*

## Chapter 16

Something old, something new

When: Late that afternoon

Where: Last class of the day

Aerith sat bolt upright in her last class of the day, as if jolted by that newfangled electricity. It had hit her out of nowhere that she may be able to solve the missing pages after all. *I've been given everything I need, haven't I? By that girl from earlier, and by Professor Sharp just this afternoon. I just have to combine them into one big effort. But will it work, can you combine magic in that way? You know who would know? Professor Fig, the very person I would need to see about it anyway.*

Time now slowed to a crawl as the class dragged on, and when it was finally over Aerith rushed about the castle asking if someone had seen a particular girl. She finally tracked her down, trying to catch her breath while the girl looked bemused.

"Cresida... Hi... Been running all over... So many stairs... Must ask you... One second..."

"Take your time," Cresida told her, chuckling. "Though I admit this school needs some kind of messaging system between students. You would think they could do something like that with magic. Humm, how would I do something like that with magic?" She gazed off in thought.

A moment later Aerith was able to straighten up and composed herself. "Right, sorry about that. Hi!"

"Hello Aerith. Can I help you?"

"You can, actually. That wonderful spell of yours, that can make a book fly. Would you be willing to cast it for me? Or teach it to me?"

"Sure, I guess? Why though? It's not very useful. Is it for pranks? I won't teach it to you if you're just going to use it to prank someone."

"Prank someone? No! Not useful, she says? Ha! It's going to make something possible, is what it's going to do. Are you doing anything right now?"

"I guess not? You need it done right away?"

"No, we need to go talk to someone else about it. You have to come with me!"

"I do?"

"Come on. You want to pay me back, don't you? That little favor I did for you? The diary? That I didn't even peak at when I retrieved it?"

"Okay, okay, no need to be pushy about it."

"Sorry, I'm just, it's gonna be so good. You'll see. I'll explain everything when we get there. Come on."

"Get where?"

"This way!" She dragged the girl by the hand.

Aerith lead her to Professor Fig's office and burst in on him.

"Professor, I've got it!"

He looked up from the book, raising an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Twenty, no thirty percent sure. Do you know anything about ritual magic?"

"You know I teach magical theory around here, right?" he answered with a grin. "What do you think?"

“Great, that’s just great. Professor Fig, this is Cresida, Cresida, Professor Fig. She’s the answer to our problem of the pages!”

“Perhaps you should start at the beginning?” he asked.

“You’re going to love it. Cresida did a spell to turn a book into a flying book. But it just sort of flapped around, not really having any *destination* in mind. But Professor Sharp told me about a thing called ritual magic. Magic done not at the personal level, but on a grand scale. Magic without a specific target, but if the pages are in range maybe we can make the book want to get nearer to them using a ritual? So I thought, hey presto, let’s combine the two! Can we do some kind of ritual magic to make the book attracted to the missing pages, and then Cresida’s spell to let it fly towards them? Of course you would have to follow on a broom, as I’m not really allowed to fly around the countryside by myself. Could that work?”

He closed the book, staring at her, lost in thought. “Hang on a second,” he told them. “I think I have a book around here somewhere...” He started tearing his office apart, reaching down into trunks far deeper than the trunk would seemingly allow, into bags, behind his shelves. Meanwhile Aerith showed Cresida the book they were talking about, with the missing pages they wanted to find. She nodded her understanding, her confusion as to why she was here finally dispelled. Finally he gave an “ah ha!” and held it up triumphantly. “Let’s just see now, shall we?” It was a battered old book but he excitedly started paging through it. “Yes, yes, this could be what we need. A few alterations of course... Oh my!”

“What?” Aerith asked.

“You’re not going to like that part.”

“What part?”

“This part.”

“Which part?”

He just laughed. “Okay let me start from the top. Ritual magic depends completely on ceremony, emotion, and intent. Far more than wand magic does. Thus a ritual that does one thing could be modified to do another as the intent is different. This ritual was one that used to be performed by newlyweds. If they wanted healthy children, they would perform the ritual with a healthy baby in the center of the circle. If they wanted great wealth they used a pile of gold. Basically it was a plea to the universe to connect them with the thing they used in the ritual. With me so far?”

“I suppose.”

“Well, as I said, emotion plays a big part in the ritual, which is to be done by two people. Cresida here would have to be one of them, we would have to modify it to include the casting of her flying book spell. Either I or you would have to be the other.”

“Still not following how I’m not going to like that part.”

“Kissing features predominantly in the ritual.”

Both girls furiously blushed and looked away from each other.

He went on, seemingly enjoying himself. “It’s an integral part too. Can’t take it out, no, couldn’t do it. Bringing things together, that’s what the ritual is about. That’s part of coming together. Now, this ritual was meant to work over time, after all a new baby wouldn’t just fly up out of the ground during the ritual nor would gold fall from the sky. But with a few tweaks from other rituals I think we could make it more immediate. Turn the ritual not towards you two but towards the book; Get it flying towards where we needed it to go, to where our missing pages are. Direct it not at the two of you, but at the book itself, force it to want to be whole again. Now, I’m far too old to be kissing any fifteen year-olds, so you two are going to have to work out what you want to do. Cresida could always do the ritual with a boy, of course, but I would rather less people know about this book than more. You see my dilemma.”

“You- you’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” she managed.

“Why Aerith, how could you say such a thing? It’s all in service to the mystery. And it was your idea. Many rituals include sacrifice too, showing your commitment to what you want to happen. Why do you think ancient cultures did so much human sacrifice? So it works to make the ritual more powerful if this particular aspect is a sacrifice, as well.”

“I didn’t expect that,” Aerith told Cresida, who still wasn’t looking at her. “So I guess we have a few options. You can teach me the spell, and I’ll go find someone else to perform the ritual with. One of my roommates, maybe? I don’t know many boys here, and I’m *not* kissing Sebastian. Or you can pick someone else, and you just have blindfold them or-”

“I’ll do it!” Cresida told her, turning even more red.

“What?”

“I said I would repay you, and I will. If my spell can actually be of some use to somebody, then fine. It’s, it’s, it’s no big deal anyway. Kissing. Another girl. It’s fine. Whatever we have to do.”

“I can wear trousers if that makes it easier.”

“Why *do* you wear those tiny skirts?”

“Interested? I’ll be getting a whole fashion lineup from the clothing store in the village pretty soon, you can try some on if you want. He’s looking to expand his business.”

“I don’t know...”

“Right, anyway, I guess we’ll do it Professor Fig.”

“Wonderful! I’ll take a break from the book and put together a ritual you can both use. Should be ready by tomorrow night. As you’re both novices with ritual magic we should probably try to get everything aligned as best we can. That means performing the ritual outside, between midnight and one AM. We could delay it one day, to Friday night, so as to lessen the impact as you won’t have classes the next day. I’ll direct the ritual so you don’t need to try and read it and perform it at the same time.”

“Perform? What exactly are we going to be doing?” Cresida asked.

“Nothing too strenuous, I assure you. We’ll need a circle, all ritual magic includes one to hold the magic in while the ritual is done, and various ‘props’ including candles, various things. You’ll walk the circle, perform various actions like pouring water, moving stones, ritual phrases, gathering the magic, holding hands, directing the intent, that sort of thing. Nothing you can’t handle.”

*At least it’ll be just us, doing it so late, no one would be around to mess us up.* “And of course the kissing,” Aerith reminded him.

“I won’t leave that part out, don’t worry.”

“And walking a circle and moving rocks is... *magical*?” Cresida asked skeptically.

“It’s the oldest type of magic we know!” he assured her. “Long before wands, witches and wizards were doing ritual magic of all kinds. It’s fallen out of favor because of the length of time it requires, wand magic is just so much more direct and convenient. But it’s just as powerful. More so.”

*Sure, how long ago was the trace put into operation? It’s a complex spell and it covers, what? The whole continent? I wonder if they renew it every year or something?*

“If you say so. Okay, Friday night then?”

“Okay.” *Ugh, this and then going to visit Anne the next day? I can sleep in a little, it won’t kill me.*

“That will give me plenty of time to refine it. I’ll do some more research then, make sure I’ve got the best ritual I can come up with. I’m sure I have more books on specific rituals we can pull from, and general theory books I can brush up on to make sure it’s even possible in the first place. But ritual magic can do pretty much anything, if you know how to ask. Good thinking, Aerith. Cresida, nice to meet you. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“See you then, Professor.”

That night after doing homework with the others in the library Aerith got her diary out from the book, the safest place she could find as she always had it with her, and sat down to write.

*Is this book mine to keep? It really is convenient in many ways. I suppose I could always commission something like this made if they want it back after I graduate. Ugh, it still says I have almost a hundred pages to find, just in the castle. Where could they be? I see so many locked doors, don't tell me they expect me to bust locks open and find them within? And if this map page is right, they're scattered all over the countryside too. Why on earth would they do that, when I'm not allowed to leave the castle? It's so weird. You don't think they just enchanted the pages to "stick" to "objects of interest" and when they flew away they didn't take doors and walls into account? That would actually make sense, an oversight like that. This could have been a rush job, they may not have tested it completely. The pages are insubstantial after all, they could just fly through walls. I'll have to ask.*

Dear Diary,

Has it really only been three days of school? It feels like a month. I have seen and done so much already, and I still have two days to go in just my first week here! Of course part of why it feels like it's been so long is because it has been, I repeated time so I could learn that whole list of spells. I've never gone back so many times to one day. But there are still so many spells to learn, I despair of ever learning them all. (Not the illegal ones, of course)

Speaking of that I told Professor Fig what I could do. He took it pretty well, the second time especially, don't ask. He's been great, mostly because he wants to know what his wife died for, I think. I'm really the only one that can give him the closure he needs. Which is fine, I don't mind doing it, I'm certainly seeing more of the castle than I ever believed I would. The crazy stuff past the gates in the library, it's wild what they have down there. What I don't understand is why so many protections on all this stuff. You have to be able to see the magic to activate it so you can pass through the archways, and go to the places you find things relating to the magic. So why also put guardian statues there as guards? They don't resist magic at all, we shoved them around like 9-pins, so any wizard competent enough to not need the archway (perhaps stumbling upon it digging for gold or something?) isn't going to have any trouble. If you're that worried about it, make sections of the floor illusionary but mark it so I can see it.

I've met most of my professors by now. I'll take my first flying lesson tomorrow, think I'll wear trousers for that one. Do they really expect girls to fly on brooms in those long skirts? Doesn't seem possible to me. Can you say 'sail?' Rather not be blown around or have a skirt blown around by the slightest breeze. Maybe they have divided skirts for that sort of thing. May as well just wear trousers at that point though. Oh and I still need to meet whoever is in charge of Magical Creatures. That class should be fun, hopefully we don't deal with anything with too many teeth our first class. Made Professor Garlick cry, I still feel a bit bad about that one. Total accident, but she really did need more safety instruction for something so dangerous. Made two potions, glad the book can carry them, they won't get broken looking like drawings on a page. I wonder how big an object I can put into the book? You could theoretically make a pencil drawing of the whole castle fit on one page, could I put a carriage in there?

I hope George is doing okay. Professor Fig hasn't said he died falling down a well by accident or anything like that. So he seems safe. That means it's possible to completely change someone's fate. I mean I realize I could change my own, but I've never repeated to make that big a change. Especially for someone else. Does that mean fate doesn't exist? But Seers exist, they deal with fate. If a Seer had seen his death that day, and suddenly he lives through it, shouldn't the Seer have seen him living through it? Shoot that's another class I have to take still, Divination. They really pile it on us, thankfully we don't take every class every day. Sometimes we take one class twice! It's an odd schedule. History of magic is a mixed bag. I was really excited to take it at first, I would love to learn

more about how wizards figured out wands, and kept their magic from others. What wizards did what, how wizards participated (or didn't) in wars and how they justified it. Were there magical wars no one else knew about? Secret Wars? I mean a couple of wizards could change the course of any war where the other side didn't have magic. But if both sides did, watch out! So they probably wouldn't, for one it would draw lots of attention and two, be over super fast because whoever struck first would probably win the day. Sadly the class is taught by a ghost and he's sooooo boring. I can hardly stay awake, and I'm not the only one. I may have to start reading ahead and ask questions or something, just to try and keep us all awake.

And speaking of wars, got attacked by Sebastian and his friend. Took them down pretty hard, love that Accio spell. You should have seen the looks on their faces when I took their wands away and they were helpless. They got a pretty big punishment, and probably more from their families. Wait, did Professor Weasley say his 'guardian?' Are his parents not alive? Not that I'm going to ask him, but if it's a painful subject I don't want to bring it up when I visit Anne over the weekend. That I'm looking forward to. All my roommates and a bunch of others are going to go down and surprise her. I got permission! I should head to the village first, buy her some sweets and flowers and such. She's just cursed or something, right? She still has to eat, may as well have something nice as she hasn't been able to go herself.

And then there's the whole magical ritual I'm going to do with Cresida because she can make the book fly around. I hope it works and we recover the pages. What will we do if they've been destroyed already? Will the magic do nothing or could it actually bring them back? I'll have to ask, if the book can't go anywhere because the pages don't exist I don't want it trying to go in every direction at once and just explode itself. I sort of have to kiss her, I guess, maybe multiple times? Not sure how I feel about that. On the one hand it's just a kiss, but on the other it's with another girl. Maybe I'll ask Mary what to expect, she seems the most likely one to have kissed a girl before.

Better get to bed. The weekend can't come fast enough.

## Chapter 17

What is required

When: Thursday

Where: A certain hallway

It was now Thursday afternoon, after classes, and Aeirth was waiting in the hall as specified by Professor Weasley. That morning she had gotten her first load of skirts from Augustus Hill, delivered by hand with a messenger as the package was far too bulky for owls. She gave him a gold coin for his trouble, as that's all she had, she hadn't found any silver or copper coins in her travels, and he thanked her profusely before leaving. *I should ask someone for change. We could all use a little... change.* She had gone through them, finding a variety of styles, colors, and fits, but nothing purely magical. He had included a note saying he was still working on keeping a dress made of water from not simply evaporating throughout the day and to please let him know how these worked out. As she couldn't decide which to wear first, and she needed to change for the flying lesson anyway, she picked one at random, then changed into trousers before the lesson, then into another one for the rest of the day. She was back to wearing her cat ears too, and her hair had changed back to brown that day making her sort of sigh, she had gotten used to it. But she hadn't seen any ministry personnel the last two days so she figured it was fine. All of this got her lots of attention, and she was sure to hand out the business cards that came with the package so she could get her commission, if Augustus was on the level (and actually sold any outfits).

Flying had, of course, been pure enjoyment. Towering over everyone who was a first year brought back memories of the sorting, but at least they had seen her before. Madam Kogawa, yes not Professor Kogawa she wasn't sure what the distinction was, explained to the class that as she had missed what would have been her flight class as a first year, here she was. They didn't mind, how many times did you get to see an upperclassman make a fool of themselves trying to balance on a broom? Luckily the broom itself seemed to have charms on it to make this easier, but still, it was a *broom*. A wooden rod, with a slight bend, not all that comfortable in the best of times. *How do boys avoid, you know...* More than one girl looked longingly at her trousers, as their skirts blew every which way in the air. *And perhaps for our second class I'll be seeing more girls so attired?* She took to the air, not quite as well as any future seeker, perhaps, but well enough to get through the rings that were nearby and then around the perimeter of the castle. The broom was dead simple to operate. If you leaned forward, you went forward. If you leaned back, you stopped. Pulling or pushing on the broom in front of you made it rise and fall, or turn. Turns she was still getting the hang of, as she tended to fishtail and then try to over-correct, which made the problem worse. She wasn't sure if it was because of the broom, which was just an old school loaner for the class, or something she just needed to practice.

"How much is a broom, if I wanted to buy one new?" she asked a fellow student when they were on the ground.

"For something decent? Probably around 600 Galleons," was the reply.

"That much?" *How many treasure chests would I have to open in dusty old ruins to afford something like that? I need to sell more dresses. Hey you want to buy a short skirt, kid? I know a great place.*

"Yeah. Tell me about it."

She was now pacing back and forth thinking about brooms, ways to make money, finding hidden things, kissing a girl tomorrow night (yes she was all over the place) when suddenly the empty part of the hallway suddenly opened up, causing her to jump back in surprise. Looking through the newly materialized door she saw what appeared to be a veritable maze beyond, of what could only be described as hundreds of years of junk. Including but not limited to; bookshelves, trunks, paintings, bathtubs, barrels, crates, floating candles, statues, farming equipment including axes, grinding wheels, suits of armor, instruments, and more. And she was pretty sure she saw some brooms neatly stacked in a rack making her wonder *did the castle just read my mind and open its junk drawer? Because this-*

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting long," said a voice, causing her to jump again. Professor Weasley came into view and looked astonished as well. "You do work quickly, don't you?"

"What do you mean? This chamber wasn't there a second ago!"

"Quite so. Why do you think I picked this particular hallway to meet you in? Allow me to introduce to you the Room of Requirement. Come along." She breezed into it, and Aerith followed. "Now, I sent Deek on ahead, if you haven't seen him he's in here someplace," she went on. "Deek is an elf, by the way. Keep a lookout."

"How can you find anything in here, even an elf?" she breathed. The room seemed to go on and on, with no end in sight. Candles floated everywhere but either the ceiling was too high, or there was no ceiling. Some of the stacks grew quite high, and Aerith stayed well away from them, to not trigger a furniture landslide that crushed them both.

"We'll straighten it up in bit," she promised. "This way I think."

As they made their way through the stacks of junk Aerith couldn't help marveling at the Room. She had seen magic do impressive things, of course, but this? *A stronghold of ancient magic, indeed. You're putting a space this big inside a castle, and I know for a fact there are stairs and other hallways near enough to the wall I passed though that normally I would be bumping into them. This chamber has existed and been added to since the castle was built, that much is clear. Why? These books must be just that old too. I wonder if any of them have anything to say about magic only certain people can see, and why that might be the case.*

"You're quiet," she remarked.

"My head is spinning, look at this place!"

She laughed. "Yes, I suppose I was the same way my first time seeing it. Ah, here's a problem." Looking forward the way was blocked by what appeared to be a small mountain of wooden chairs. "But an excellent place to start. The rules of the Room are a little different from the outside. We can manipulate what is here, changing the Room in ways we cannot change the outside. For example, these chairs. We can Vanish them, and the room will change them into raw potential. Which we can then use to create other things. I will show you the wand movement."

Aerith concentrated on a return point, then followed her movement and said the incantation. The chairs vanished, leaving behind a small pile of crystal. *Huh.*

"I see you're confused as to how you learned the spell so quickly. That's because it's not a spell. Not exactly, anyway. Think of the spells I teach you here as being levers you can pull, to make the Room do something. Doing the same 'spell' outside the Room, nothing will happen."

"That explains it! And this crystal that's been left behind, that's the potential you spoke of?"

"Exactly. Pick it up for now, I'll show you how to use it later."

Aerith did, slipping it into the book.

"I must say, that's a clever way of carrying it. I guess we didn't consider that while things could be put into the book, you would still have to carry it around with you."

"I can't exactly take the credit for it," Aerith admitted. "I went to the clothing shop and asked for some kind of pack or holster, and the man that owns it made it for me."

"I see. Still, you took the initiative to ask. Many wouldn't have. Come along."

A moment later more chairs blocked the way, and again Aerith cleared them, collecting the stones.

“My word,” the professor exclaimed, looking at a ratty old bag sat atop a rickety desk. “My old school bag? Impossible, yet here it is. Keep going, Deek should be around here somewhere. I’d like to have a look at this.”

“Of course.” *And now my nefarious plan can be put into action.* Aerith left the professor happily digging through her old bag and turned a corner. She didn’t have to wait long, she had been seeing broom racks every so often in this place and went over to it. A quick test later showed that yes, it was still able to fly or at least hover off the ground. *So it should fly, right? But can I take it out of the Room? I don’t see why not. If that really is the Professor’s old school bag it got put in here somehow. So it can be taken out again. Plus, if I do this...* She opened up the book again which happily sucked the broom in, and she smiled. *Thanks, Hogwarts. Now to find our wayward elf.*

She moved past a few more stacks of stuff, coming to an open area where someone or some thing was chucking cans over his shoulder, digging around above her inside a box.

“Deek?” she called hesitantly.

“Yes?” answered a voice, and a large head with large ears poked out of the box. “Oh, you made it, wonderful.” He hopped down, a leather bag in his hand that was almost too big for him to handle. “Professor Weasley is with you?”

“She saw something she recognized in the room, she’ll be along. Nice to meet you, Deek.”

“Nice to meet you too, Aerith. Oh, here she is now.”

The professor walked up behind them, carrying her school bag. “Silly, I know,” she admitted. “But I’ll find a place for it somewhere in my office.”

*Ah, things can be taken out of here. Good to know.*

“Now, we can get started. First, we should configure the Room to be more in line with your needs, Aerith. Thankfully, that is quite simple. I will explain.”

“Forgive me, professor, but what exactly am I doing here?” she asked. “You haven’t really said.”

“Goodness, didn’t I? We want you to have a quiet place to work and study, so you can more easily catch up to your peers. Deek and I decided the Room would be perfect place.”

“It is quiet, I’ll give you that. But what’s wrong with the library?”

“Nothing, of course. But this place can be tailored to your every need. For example, simply think about what sort of space you might want to work in, and all of this will be replaced with that reality. Go ahead, give it a try.”

“Uh...” Aerith’s eyes were wide. “How? What?” She glanced around. “Replaced? With us standing right here?”

“It’s perfectly safe,” Professor Weasley assured her. “I’ve done it many times in my time here.”

“So where does the stuff go?”

“I’m not sure it ‘goes’ anywhere. The Room seems infinitely large, and infinitely malleable. We will simply ‘move’ to a location that is unoccupied and has what you thought of. Some have claimed that all possible realities are contained within the Room and we are simply selecting them, but it can’t be proven.”

“Either way... You’re telling me that this room is going to read my mind, and then all the tons and tons of stuff here will be whisked away and be replaced, from my point of view, with what I thought of?”

“Exactly.”

“I ask again, how? Where is the power coming from? What is reading my thoughts? This goes far, far beyond any magic I’ve seen done. I mean I saw a trunk with a little extra space but this place seems to go on forever.”

"We don't really know how the castle was made," she sighed. "No one alive can even come close to recreating the enchantment that was used to create this room."

*Are you sure about that? I wonder, could my magic do it? Is that what path I'm on right now? But I don't see any motes or anything. Of course, those could be potential power, while this room has been in use for a thousand years.* "So you don't know how it works."

"Not the specifics, no. I don't have to understand it to use it."

"I suppose that's true..." *I don't exactly know where magic comes from, when it comes down to it. Why a bit of wood and a 'core' can create a miracle when you wave it around a bit.*

"So, what are you thinking? Go ahead, don't think small, the Room will provide."

Aeirith goggled at her. "Are you crazy! I'm not moving a single bit of this place. Have you seen how many bookcases are stacked up around here? We need to get an army of people in here and start cataloging everything in sight. There could be artwork dating back a thousand years. Books from when the castle was made! Furniture from famous artisans." *Any and all of it worth a fortune!* "This place is a *project* not something to simply step over on the way to some 'quiet space' as you put it. You want me to have some space, give me some space. I see enough locked doors in the halls, some must be empty rooms I could use. I don't need a magical reconfiguring room for that."

"Oh dear, trust a Ravenclaw to see books and forget all else."

"You're not the least bit curious? Really?" Aerith couldn't believe it.

"Not really, no."

She couldn't process it. The possibility this room offered, just as it was right now, it was staggering. But at the same time... "Fine. I'll humor you. But as it's infinitely malleable, as you say, come on." She turned and walked back the way they came, looking around for what she needed. She spotted it about halfway back, a box she pulled out with magic, then scrambled up to a platform above. There was a chest which she opened, taking out another robe with a sigh, then cast the spell on the chest to turn it into potential. With the platform now empty she closed her eyes. *Okay Room, here's the deal. Don't touch a thing. Rather, give me what I've been seeing all along. An archway to another place I can put my own stuff in. A couple of rooms, make a training room, a potions room, a plants room, a library, a pool for swimming, obviously a bathroom, oh, oh, someplace to practice flying, a beach with plenty of sand and sun, a Floo point so I can just come here whenever. Sure, infinite my butt, we'll see how you do with all that!* She opened her eyes and the archway was before her, leading into a corridor with a green flame balanced on a pedestal, and beyond... "I think it worked!"

"I'm not scrambling up there," Professor Weasley complained. "I'm not as young as I used to be."

"It's fine, just get up on the box."

"I suppose I can manage that much." She hiked up her skirts and stood on the box.

"Now be very, very still. Wingardium Leviosa!" She carefully levitated the box up only, keeping her wand as straight as possible. Then she offered a hand and Professor Weasley stepped across. She put the box back down. "Nothing to it."

"Excellent control," she praised. "Now, what's this?"

"Let's go find out."

And it was all there. The beach, the pool, the empty rooms ready to be filled with stuff. Aerith had to admit, she was impressed. *Thank you, she sent to the Room. I underestimated you. Sorry about that.*

"No problem," said one of the paintings.

"What was that?" she blurted, jumping.

"Humm? I didn't say anything."

"Right."

“This seems adequate,” Professor Weasley admitted. “Now, let’s take out those stones you got and I’ll show you a spell to turn them into things. You will also need those spellcrafts I had you buy in the village.”

“Okay.”

And so, for the next half hour or so, Aerith set up her Room. Deek, it seemed, was to be her assistant, which of course Aerith protested greatly at when she heard it. He smiled up at her, having set down the bag he had found over to one side.

“It’s fine,” Professor Weasley whispered to her. “He enjoys it. Just don’t give him clothes, that’s all I ask.”

“Enjoys... I’m not sure sure about that.”

“Trust me dear.”

“Okay...” *I’ll be asking him about that privately.*

She didn’t have much “moonstone” but Professor Weasley assured her it came up out of the ground all over the place around the castle.

“What good is that going to do me?” she asked. “I can’t just wander the countryside, now can I? I had to get permission to go to the village, and recent troll attacks notwithstanding, it should be the second safest place around here.”

“Ah yes, that is a problem, isn’t it?” she admitted. “There is a spellcraft for a device that can create moonstone that you can place right here in the room. It’s fairly expensive though. Never mind that, I will purchase it for you over the weekend.”

“Oh. Thank you. You don’t have to do that. There must be odd jobs I can do around the castle to make some money. Or in town? I know how to brew two potions, can I sell them?”

“Heavens no, child!” she gasped. “You would have to be licensed, and that means being an adult at least. Taking the ministry exams to make sure you’re competent, getting insurance, a host of things. Besides, you have your schoolwork to think about, that’s the whole reason for coming here in the first place. To take you away from that would be counter productive. No, it’s fine, I should have thought of it earlier honestly. I will buy it, and I’ll not take no for an answer.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll gather more moonstone for you as well, so you have enough to build the device so you can get started. For now, let’s see if your Floo node works both ways, and you can go do your homework for this evening.”

*Yes, my homework of exploring this place. Books! So many books! And they’re all mine. MINE. HHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA.* “Of course, professor. Deek, not much to do at the moment, you’re free to come with us and go do something else. Is there a way I can call you if I need you?”

“Deek will stay, if it okay with Aerith,” he told her. “As there is a passage back Deek would like to continue looking through the Room.”

“Whatever you want to do,” she agreed. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yes, Aerith. You should be proud of all the potions you’ve brewed.”

“Uh, thank you.” The two used the Floo back to the Ravenclaw dorm. “Looks like that works. Uh, Deek knows I’ve only brewed two potions in my life, right?”

“He’s getting on in years,” she admitted. “I’ve known him since I was a little girl.”

“Uh huh.” *Great, a senile elf, just what my life needed.* “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“Thank you. Now to get back...”

## Chapter 18

Getting Anne Back  
When: Friday Night  
Where: Outside the castle

Friday seemed to both drag on endlessly and be over far too quickly for Aerith's liking, and now she and Cresida were heading around the castle wall to where they would meet Professor Fig. It was about half an hour to midnight, they had been awakened by their alarms built into the bed, and snuck out without seeing another soul in the halls. Both had on only their school robe, as Fig had explained that in ages past, rituals were done "skyclad."

"I'm not going to insist on that, of course," he assured them quickly. "And as a substitute for that a thin white robe would be most appropriate, but we'll work with what we have. Wear as little as you feel comfortable with, as anything between you and the magic is detrimental to the ritual."

She had looked for some in the Room, not able to spend nearly as much time there as she wanted, but hadn't found any. She hadn't shown her roommates yet either, hopefully Sunday they could go crazy in there. Naturally Aerith still had her belt on, and the book at her hip. She would take that off later.

"I'm pretty nervous," Cresida admitted.

"Me too, but I can guarantee it'll be fine!" *After all, I can repeat the ritual as many times we need to, and correct her before any problems arise.*

"I'm glad you're so confident. Must be nice."

"I suppose. Don't worry. Just relax, do whatever Professor Fig tells you do, and an hour later the book will be winging towards the missing pages. If they exist. And are in range."

"How long do you think he'll have to fly for? If it's hours what if he has to stop because he's falling asleep? Or what if-"

"I'll be fine, Cresida, don't worry so much."

"Okay, okay, I'll try."

They reached the spot, and it seemed Professor Fig had gone all out. He had an assortment of candles, rope, bowls, censers, bells, jugs, wooden shapes with parts cut out of them, and more in a pile.

"Good, good, right on time. We'll go over the ritual, set up the circle, and start exactly at midnight!" He put away his pocket watch. "Now, I've marked north so here is south..."

Both read over what he wanted them to do, coiled the rope up into a small circle, put the book in the middle of it, lit the candles, and started on time. Naturally Aerith created a new return point before they began, just in case. For the next hour the two girls walked one way and then another around the circle. They poured water from jugs into bowls held by the other, put the shapes together each holding one hand, swung the censers, rang the bells, and of course kissed every fifteen minutes. Once at each of the cardinal directions. All the while chanting about how the book was going to seek out that which was missing, and how things should be together, all under the direction of Professor Fig. At the end of it he broke the circle, which he said would release the magic, and Cresida cast her spell on the book.

Everyone held their breath as the book started to vibrate a little bit. Suddenly it shot in the air and started flapping away.

“It worked!” Professor Fig exclaimed. “Well done, girls!” He jumped on his broom. “I’ll let you know where it goes, wish me luck!” He shot after it.

“It actually worked?” Cresida breathed, watching them both fly away. “What a strange way to do magic.”

“I didn’t mind it,” Aerith told her.

“Oh? Which part specifically?” she wondered, teasing.

“You know, all of it?” she replied with a wave of her hand.

“We better get this stuff picked up and get back inside. With our luck now that the Professor is gone Peeves will show up and then who knows what rumors will start about us being out here alone together. With rope. And candles.”

“Good plan.”

She stuck everything into her book and the two girls made their way back around the wall.

Making it back into the castle without incident the two were about to go to their respective rooms.

“Thanks for your help,” Aerith told her before they separated. “You have more than repaid me for what I did for you. If you ever need anything, let me know.” *I think we’re friends now. I mean you can’t go through a kissing ritual like that and not be friends with someone, right?*

“I will. And it, er, wasn’t as bad as I thought. You know, all of it.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Not that I’m asking if you wanted to do anything like that ever again, or anything!” she hurried on. Turning away because she could feel her face heating up.

“No, of course not we better go now!”

“Good night!”

Both rushed away from each other.

In the morning she got up with the others, not that they had any excuse to be sleeping in, they hadn’t done a midnight ritual. As the weather was fine she said they would head out to see Anne around ten o’clock and after a quick breakfast she went to give Professor Fig his stuff back. She found him with the book in his office.

“Ah, Aerith, there you are! Come in, come in, you’ll never believe what the book led me to!”

“So it did lead you somewhere?”

“It did! Look, all repaired!” He flipped through the book, and as he said there were no missing pages.

“Wonderful. What were the pages, anyway?”

“A map, to the location drawn on the pages. I have no idea how they would have gotten there, but someone clearly found that passage and took them. That ritual spell really was a stroke of genius, I have no idea how we would have found them otherwise!”

“But how? No one but we could get through that archway.”

“Maybe another person in the past could see the same type of magic you can? I don’t know, but there was clearly a skeleton in the last chamber. Along with more of those guardian statues you spoke of, which must have been what killed him.”

“More of them? Are you all right?”

He chuckled. “Fine, just fine. I was fortunate enough to see the remains before entering the room, so I was invisible when I entered. That helped. Not sure how statues see but until they got a good look at me, I was able to examine the room a bit before destroying them.”

“Why destroy them? You had the pages...”

“We have to go back. There’s another one of those archways. I poked my wand out and tried opening it myself, but either I missed it completely, or it doesn’t work for me. Felt right foolish actually, wandering around the place with my wand out hoping to run into something. Very glad no one was around to see me.”

“They love those archways, don’t they?”

“So it seems. The area was quite pretty, I think you’ll like it. I saw the symbol several times before that as well. There were gates I had to open, which thankfully responded to the blasting curse and released the seal on the doors. You’ll see, when we head back there. Would you like to leave now? You can use a broom right? Do you have one? We can get a school broom if-”

*Back it up, partner!* She held up her hands. “Hold on, we’re visiting Anne later today. We can do it this afternoon.” *It’s not going anywhere.*

“Oh.” His face fell. “I suppose that will be fine. I made quite a mess getting in, but I doubt anyone really visits the area I found the cave in. So I doubt anyone will wander in by accident. Very well. I’ll keep pouring over this book.”

“What have you discovered about it so far?”

He glared at it. “That’s it’s mostly complete nonsense. I even tried holding it upside down, nope, still gibberish.”

“What?”

“I know! It doesn’t make sense. The map was real, clearly it led me to the place, but everything else seems to be just made up garbage. That could be why only the pages with the map were taken? Maybe you need to take it through the archway before the real contents are revealed. You know, as another security measure.”

“That would be consistent with everything else we’ve been through,” she admitted with a sigh. “I’ll be back after lunch and we can... Oh. Will I be allowed out of the castle again? I’m already leaving once to visit Anne, I don’t want to push it.”

“It’s fine, if you’re with me. But I agree, it could be a problem in the future if there is more to do after this. We’ll take that as it comes.”

“Very well.”

“Have fun with your friends!”

“I will!”

“But be ready to work this afternoon!” She glared at him but he was grinning.

“Fine!”

One by one the girls passed through the Floo network to the village, scattering and buying various things for Anne. There was quite a turnout, including Aerith, her 5 roommates, and eight other girls. *Anne seems to be a popular one.* With that done they headed to Feldcroft and asked around for where she lived. There were only half a dozen houses there, so it wasn’t that difficult to find. A bearded man was working outside and straightened up as they approached.

“Mr. Sallow?” Aerith greeted him.

“Yes?”

“We’d like to visit with Anne, if she’s up to it. We’re, I mean it’s obvious, isn’t it? We’re her friends from school.”

There was a general agreement that this was true. Before letting anyone come she made sure everyone could vouch for everyone else. She didn’t want anyone simply pretending, and Anne not being pleased to see them. But everyone passed, so it was true. To a point, as Aerith had never met Anne, but hopefully they could become friends and then Aerith could simply repeat the day and tell the truth they were, even though they hadn’t *technically* met yet so she was just pretending all that happened and this was the repeat. (Yes it’s a bit complicated try to follow along)

He looked the group over. As they were carrying half of Honeydukes, flowers, games, books, and bottles of butterbeer, it hardly seemed they were lying. (One weird girl was carrying strings and sealing wax and other fancy stuff, which Aerith assumed was some kind of inside joke?)

“She’s inside,” he told them. “But she’s in a lot of pain. You might not be able to stay for long.”

“If it starts to get to her we’ll go,” Aerith promised. “We just want to visit, raise her spirits a bit.”

“All right then, as it seems you’ve gone to a lot of trouble already. She’ll probably be glad to see you all. Go on in.”

They knocked on the door and waited for Anne to open it, as they wanted to surprise her. Which they did, yelling “Surprise!” as she opened it and looked out at them. That’s what you do, you know, command someone to be surprised when you think they should be. Her eyes got wide and a little wet as she stepped out of the house and everyone greeted her. They moved out into the field as there was no way their tiny house could hold everyone, and sat on the grass. She moved a bit slowly, clearly in pain, but seemed to be in great spirits with everyone there. They were all asking how she was and talking about school, it was, as the Japanese might say, “kashimashi.”

Finally she could get a word in edgewise and looked over at our heroine.

“I recognize everyone but you,” she told Aerith. “Have we met?”

Not yet,” she admitted a bit sheepishly. “I’m Aerith! After your brother, Sebastian, mentioned you, and I learned that I replaced you in the room I felt it was my duty to come and cheer you up. So I organized this little get together and here we are!”

“Thanks. You did this for a total stranger? Huh. How is my brother, anyway? My uncle was screaming about ‘I’mma murder that boy’ the other day but wouldn’t say why?”

“Ah, he’s fine,” Aerith hedged. “Got into a bit of trouble, yes, but I think it’ll be a good teaching experience for him. Or would it be a learning experience? Well, in either case I hope it will save him from further trouble later on.”

“Wait, how do you know about what happened?” asked Mary. “I heard he isn’t allowed his wand outside of class but no one can get him to say why.”

“Yes, it’s a bit of a private matter between us,” she evaded. “He made a mistake, no harm came from it, and I’ve put it behind me. I’m not going to tell on him if he doesn’t want it known.”

“Wow, it must have really been bad,” Jo told her. “You’re okay, right?”

“Like I said, he didn’t touch me, it’s fine. But how are you really?” she asked Anne, changing the subject.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “It comes and goes.”

“What exactly happened?” Elle asked. “Is there anything we can do?”

She gave a short laugh. “Unless you’re a better healer than anyone at St. Mungo’s, no. There was a raid by Rookwood and that goblin, Ranrok I think his name is? I don’t know what they were looking for around *here*, I mean have you seen this place?” She indicated the nearby area. “It’s mostly farmland. Nothing interesting for miles.”

*I should look around, see if there’s any weird magic here. Still, George said the ministry wasn’t sure how dangerous Ranrok was, was that before or after this attack here? I mean how much more evil do you need to be to do something like this to a child?*

She went on. “I didn’t know what was happening but saw people being cursed, so I rushed out to help. I heard someone behind me and got cursed myself. I’ve been, like this, ever since.”

“So you don’t know who did it?” asked one of the girls Aerith didn’t know.

She shook her head. “There were all sorts of Ashwinders and goblins here that night, could have been any one of them.”

“What? Those things that leave eggs all over the place?” asked Tina. “What do they have to do with curses?”

“No, no, it’s what Rookwood’s followers call themselves. Personally I think they’re really bad at naming things. I wouldn’t have picked that name.”

“Something needs to be done about them,” Jo spat. “Rookwood and Ranrok. I’ve heard they’re both running around the area, terrorizing people and looking for something. And what does the ministry do? Nothing! I’ve heard they’ve got camps set up all over, you can hardly go anywhere without being harassed by them. It’s shameful.”

*Looking for something? What if it was Ranrok that day at the bank? That goblin stopped us, then I saw him speeding off in another cart. To get his boss? Could he be the one that sent the dragon, looking for the key? Sloppy, if so. The key would have been lost, why not attack on the ground before we left in that case? Doesn’t add up, but the key did lead to the bank, so there is a connection. Still, if there is someone else who can see what I can see, and they’re searching for the same answers I am about it... But could a goblin see magic? And why would these two be working together?* “Nothing to do with us,” Aerith told them. “You’re holding up okay, Anne?”

“It’s not easy. I’m in a lot of pain, but otherwise I’m okay. I don’t sleep very well because of it.”

*She does look exhausted. Isn’t there a sleeping potion she could take?* “What kind of spell can do that?”

The others all looked around but shrugged.

“I wonder if it’s not even magic doing it now,” Elle finally said. “Like, you were hit by some kind of curse, right?” Anne nodded. “Maybe you just reacted badly to it. Maybe you can’t be ‘cured’ because there’s nothing magical to cure. The curse is gone but the effect remains, like seeing what’s left of a house after a fire.”

“She’s got a point,” Aerith decided. “A magical hospital would look for a magical cause. Did you try a non-magical one?”

“A muggle hospital?” she spat, disgust clear on her face. “Not on your life, they don’t know anything.”

*Don’t be so sure.* “I guess if you say so. But what Elle says is a good point. What are you going to do now?”

She hung her head sadly. “I don’t know. It’s just so hard to do *anything* any more but at the same time-”

“Come back to school,” Mary told her, leaning towards her.

“What?”

“Yeah! You can be in pain and miserable and alone *here* or you can be in pain and miserable and have your friends around to help you out *there*. What do you say? Come on, we miss you!”

“I’m not giving up my bunk, it’s actually really nice,” Aerith joked, crossing her arms. “Or sleeping double. Find your own room, or work something out with Mary I guess.”

“You’re welcome to!” she agreed, perhaps a little too quickly.

She snorted and the others all ribbed Mary. “I don’t know.”

“We must be able to accommodate you,” Aerith continued, thinking about it. “It’s a freaking magical castle, with all sorts of magical people running around inside it. Maybe the solution is mundane as the malady doesn’t seem magical. Less classes, or time between them to rest would be all you needed. I mean you may not be able to do all the jumping about we do in Defense class but you could still learn about charms and stuff. Most of our classes are done sitting down anyway!”

“You do have a point,” she conceded, looking thoughtful.

“And think of it this way,” Jo told her. “If there is nothing to cure, you may be like this the rest of your life. You have to learn how to live with it, now. You’re not contagious or anything, it’s just harder on you. So, let’s figure out how to make it easier! We’re all here for you, Anne. Don’t just sit in a dark room and feel sorry for yourself. If you really are having trouble sleeping, go to history class and have Binns put you to sleep with one of his lectures!”

All the girls laughed, even Anne. "If nothing else, that would do it," she admitted. "And if not, I could be the first person to ever pass his class. I wonder if the school would give me a special award?"

Aerith suddenly jumped up. "I know how to help!" she announced. "Girls, stay right here. Stay! I'll be back with something I saw yesterday. It'll help you make up your mind, Anne, I'm sure of it. Stay here I'll be right back!"

"We're not going anywhere," Sabrina told her, not looking around for what was available for pranking potential.

"Don't you prank me by hiding or anything, I know your style!" She wiggled a finger at her.

"I... wasn't thinking that at all!" she protested, getting more laughs.

"Uh huh. I know right where it is," *I think*. "Be back in a few minutes."

Aerith raced to the Floo network node and wished herself back to the Room of Requirement. Tearing past her section and back out to the junk maze she screeched to a halt, doubled back, and greeted Deek.

"Hi Deek! Why are you sweeping I only just wished this place into existence- never mind! I'm pretty sure I saw a weird looking chair with wheels on it out there someplace. You remember anything like that?"

"Deek does remember it, Miss. Would you like Deek to show you?"

"If you don't mind. I think I know where it is but I'd rather not get lost."

"This way, Miss."

The two stood in front of the wheelchair, and Deek showed her how to use it. Like a broom it was enchanted to move on its own, by pressing a control stick on the front.

"Yes, this will be perfect," she gushed. "Thank you Deek, this is going to make Anne's day!" She sucked it into the book and they both went back to the Floo node. Passing several more brooms she grabbed them up as well. "I'll let you know how it works out."

"Deek is glad to help, Miss. Deek will see you back here soon?"

"I'll be 'mining' this place tomorrow, unless something happens to me." *I do still have to do Professor Fig's thing*. "See you then."

"Farewell."

Racing back to Anne she got the chair out, and Anne exclaimed over it. She also got out the brooms, passing them out and saying the girls could keep them if they wanted. They were old, but all still worked, so it was better than having no broom at all. After a moment of flying around they all landed again and saw how Anne was doing. *Why just keep them gathering dust in the Room? They're so expensive, may as well make use of them.*

"Where did you get all this stuff?" Tina asked her.

"I'll show you tomorrow. You're not going to believe it. I'll need all of your help to manage it, it's incredible. Right now, how are you doing Anne?"

"This is great," she replied, a big smile on her face. "Not needing to walk around might really help. All those stairs are going to be a problem though."

"Floo network nodes by the classrooms though," Jo reminded her. "You could basically use them to get around, as long as the chair will go through them."

"And if not, it's not like you *can't* stand up," Aerith told her. "If the teachers can make me a whole book that can suck things into it, they could make you a single bag or something. You just put the chair away, go though the Floo, and get it back out. Easy. I expect they would bend over backwards to help get you back to class. I mean, right?" The other girls all nodded.

“I’ll go talk to my uncle, but if he says it’s okay, then yeah, I’m going to go back to Hogwarts on Monday! Thanks, Aerith. Everyone. You... You’re really the best!” She held out her arms, and everyone rushed to hug her.

*We did good. That’s what magic is all about! The magic of friendship, that is. There’s no better kind, not even rituals.*

## Chapter 19

Where the Pages Led

When: Saturday Afternoon

Where: Professor Weasley's office

“And so, we found her a chair with wheels she can use to sit in, and still get around,” Aerith told Professor Weasley excitedly. “Her uncle said she could do a trial week at least, to see how she holds up. But she wants to come back. Anne wants to come back to Hogwarts! She can, right? We can help her with the chair and everything, right? Make whatever accommodations she needs?”

Aerith and her friends were crowded into Professor Weasley’s office after they got back, they were excited to have their friend back and thought it might be worth dropping in on Professor Weasley just so she didn’t show up out of the blue. “Aerith, slow down, count to five between each word,” she said with the hint of a grin. “Of course she can come back. And we’ll do whatever we can to accommodate her, of course.”

“Yes!” The girls cheered, jumping in place and hugging each other.

“My my, such enthusiasm for learning. It warms my heart to see it.”

“Yes, learning,” Sabrina totally agreed. “That’s what it is.”

“It’s good to see you all so happy. Now go, get out of here. I’ll go down to Feldcroft myself, speak to her Uncle. There will be some paperwork to fill out, but that’s no trouble. Go do homework!”

“Yes, Professor,” all the girls lied, giggling and running out of the room.

Aerith had to pinky swear, to each of her roommates, she would show them the place she got the brooms and chair from the next day before they would let her go.

“Professor Fig again?” Jo exclaimed when she said where she was going. “Are you related to him or something?”

“Has he got some kind of dirt on you?” Sabrina asked. “Is he forcing you to do disgusting things?”

“Is he forcing you to wear a maid outfit and clean his office?” Tina asked.

“Are you doing secret detention and he’s making you write lines?” asked Mary.

“Are you two in some kind of cult and you must worship a dark god once a day to appease them?” asked Tina.

“Girls, girls, please. I’ll tell you everything tomorrow. Everything. I promise.” *It’s stupid to keep this whole seeing magic thing secret. Either you can, or you can’t. They’re not going to kill me and rip my eyeballs out. There’s no sense in not telling them, and I may need their support sooner rather than later.*

“You better,” they all told her.

And so she was flying behind Professor Fig on her ‘borrowed’ broom, the one she got from the Room. He seemed to be keeping his speed down, the top speed of hers wasn’t all that great.

“Not far now!” he shouted to her, pointing.

“Okay!” *I wonder.* She carefully got her wand out, putting her hand through the loop. “Revelio.” Gripping the broom tightly and trying to focus she managed not to fall off, as knowledge of the

surrounding area suddenly slammed into her brain. “Stop, stop!” she called. She screeched to a halt and spun the broom around.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just did a Revelio spell on a whim. Don’t ask me how I know, but there’s a group of puffskein over there, some kind of treasure over there, a page from the book? You’ve got to be kidding me way out here? A nest of spiders is there, and I think a camp with Ranrok loyalists just beyond those trees. Was that supposed to happen?”

“What? No, of course not.” He got out his own wand. “Revelio.” He looked around. “Are you sure? I’m not getting anything like that.”

“No, it’s true!”

“Show me the puffskein then, that seems the safest.”

“Right. Oh shoot, it faded. Revelio! Okay, this way.”

A moment later the pair, holding their brooms, was surrounded by the cute puffball creatures that were bouncing around them and happily squeaking and chattering. Naturally they had run away at first, but after the two sat a moment and didn’t make any sudden moves, the fuzzballs came back to investigate and were now acting quite friendly towards them.

“There really are puffskeins,” Professor Fig had to admit. “And you could tell that, from so far away?”

“It was the craziest thing, like I could almost see like a sign pointing right to them.”

“Strange. We just keep finding out more and more about how strong your magic is. And how different it could be from everyone else’s. I wonder...” He looked serious.

“What is it?”

“It could be a little dangerous, but could you use that ability to see how many Ranrok loyalists are in the area? Mark their camps maybe? If we had some idea of their numbers, maybe George could further convince the Ministry to take action.”

“Is there some way to mark the enchanted one in the book?” she asked, getting it out. The puffskeins went over to sniff it, but lost interest almost at once. She opened to the map page but almost dropped the book. “Look at this, there’s a paw print on the map now, is this where we are?” She showed him.

“You know, I think it is. Let’s go get near that spider’s nest you spoke of, see how close we have to be before it gets marked on the map.”

“Right!”

It turned out, not very close. In fact the camp had already shown up, as well as the treasure marker. It was a bit tricky, holding the book and the wand but they went slowly, Aerith keeping a good hold on both.

“Did your magic influence the book in some way?” Professor Fig asked, the two of them floating above everything. “I doubt the other professors that worked on it put that ability into it. But I could ask around.”

“I have no idea,” she replied honestly. “I didn’t do it consciously, I can tell you that much.”

“So, would you be able to do as I’ve asked?”

“Sure. Just zoom around the area and cast Revelio a hundred times? I’d need a faster broom maybe. I don’t want any dark wizards chasing me.”

“True. Stay well away from anything your spell tells you is dangerous. I’ll see what I can do. If we could prove, beyond doubt, that Ranrok was moving through the area and how many goblins were under his command, the ministry would be forced to act. You could help stop him before he gets any stronger.”

*Putting ministry personnel at risk, but then, that is their job.* “I’ll think about it. One thing at a time for now. Let’s go check out your cave or whatever.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go.”

“What’s a Pensieve doing here?” Aerith asked as they neared the area.

“What? Oh no, I think that’s an actual bird bath,” Professor Fig told her. They both got off their brooms, and Aerith put them into her book.

“Why would a bird bath... But then why would a Pensieve be out in the middle of nowhere. Great balls of fire what happened here?” She looked around the area, and stone littered the place, a jagged hole leading to darkness seemingly blasted into the wall nearby.

“Yes,” the professor agreed glumly. “I saw no other way inside. The book came here and started bumping against the wall there. I had to blast it down to proceed. There was another solution but I didn’t have the pages at the time to tell me that. Apparently, if you speak some words to the birdbath there the wall would open. A strange system, but there you are. I would have liked to study how it worked, but too late now I suppose.”

“I suppose we could repair it later, once we no longer need the entrance.”

“That’s a good idea! Even if the enchantment has been lost because of the damage I did, we won’t have to go back so it’s not a loss. And we don’t want anyone else wandering down there. Come on, the archway isn’t far.” He lit his wand up and went inside.

Professor Fig led Aerith past a dozen dead spiders, explained how he discovered hitting the metal plates on the walls with magic opened the nearby gate, and finally the pair reached the archway. The remains of stone statues littered the floor here, just as he had described. Aerith nodded.

“There’s a wellspring of magic just there,” she told him. “Put your wand in it, I want to see what happens.”

He did, but nothing happened.

“So it’s only me,” she mused. “Very well, let’s see where we go this time.” She poked it, activating the arch which seemed to lead only a short distance to another one, and a chamber beyond.

“This whole thing is like a maze, but all the parts of the maze are scattered about,” Professor Fig remarked.

“Yeah, just get on with it,” Aerith muttered. “Shall we?”

“Let’s go!”

The path was trapped, it started flooding with water at once, but as soon as Professor Fig realized it wasn’t getting near Aerith he grabbed onto her. The bubble was barely big enough for her, so he had to cling fairly close.

“Sorry about this!”

“So inappropriate,” she chided him. “A professor hugging a student. Get your own magical protection bubble!” But she was smiling.

“I would if I could, believe me. I suppose a bubble head charm... You aren’t doing this, are you?”

She shook her head. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“Curious. Let’s go before it wears off!”

“Right.”

They “easily” walked through the water, passing through the next arch, which seemed to hold it back. *So it was just another protection on a gate that can only be opened by the one that can see the magic. That really isn’t good enough? It has to be double protected? Really?*

“Extraordinary. We can pass through but the water can’t? Was the water even real? Would we have suffocated ourselves trying not to breathe imaginary water?”

“You’re welcome to go back through, try and breathe a bit and see what happens.”

“No thank you, let’s just move on.”

“Thought so. But you’re asking the wrong question. How did the magic know to protect *me*? Equal chance it was you that could see the magic, right? Unless I did it myself without realizing?”

“Which is actually the more scary scenario. If you can do magic unconsciously, like you really did change the book and made that bubble just now, what else might you do by accident? We need to know what your magic is capable of, so you don’t hurt someone by accident.”

“Agreed.”

The two came to a large chamber, again very ostentatious, with a sparkly floor and four huge panels that looked like paintings. A figure stepped into view, and both stared up at it.

“So, someone has finally found our map chamber,” said the figure. “But which one, I wonder, is the one we’ve been waiting for? Humm?” He looked us both over.

“Take a guess,” Aerith told him. “Given all of this fifth year nonsense, who else could it be?”

“You? Can you see the traces of ancient magic?”

“Yeah, about that, why do you call it ancient magic? All magic is ancient, shouldn’t it be ancient spells or something? But never mind, there’s a more pressing question. Did she betray you, in the end?”

“Who?”

“The girl. Isidora. Did she become evil and betray you? For what you did, or rather, didn’t do? Come on, I’m dying to know!”

“Have you somehow found the trial sites early?”

“What trial sites? I saw how she looked at you in the memories as you walked away from her sick brother, not even bothering to descend from your lofty perch to check on the people below. That was all I needed to see.”

“It’s getting ahead of the story a bit, and I don’t think it was for that reason, but yes, she did betray us in the end.”

“Called it!” Aerith exclaimed. “You owe me twenty Galleons, Professor.”

“Remind me when we get back,” he sighed. “You were right.”

“You bet on whether she betrayed us or not?” the portrait asked. “That seems wrong, somehow.”

“Consider our perspective. It happened hundreds of years ago, and there must have been a reason you picked those memories to show us. Obvious, though *someone* thought there might be more nuance to it.”

“He did say it probably wasn’t because of that. I think I only owe you half.”

“He can’t know her mind! I bet betrayal, you bet against, you lost. Don’t try to weasel out of it.” *I can use the money.*

“This is all very irregular,” the painting told them. “Can we get back on task?”

“Of course! We can finally get some answers, and maybe I can finally get some training, or something. I definitely want to learn how to create holes in the air to other places. Can I enchant stone soldiers to fight for me? Do they have to be stone, or could I use metal? Those stone ones break pretty easily. Are the other special spells I can use and how do I learn them? Can I do magic unconsciously, and how do I stop doing it before I hurt someone?”

“Slow down, I can’t teach you any of those things!”

“I see.” She paused a moment. “Right. How do we get out of here?” She looked around. “Ah, that door there? Byeeeee.” She started walking towards it.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Back to my life. I have homework to do, and a huge storage room to clean out, and regular old spells to learn. I have four years of education to catch up on, I don’t have time to be standing around here talking to paintings. I’ve already lost a lot of time almost being killed, multiple times I might add,

by these stone soldier things you've for some reason left everywhere. You set all this up. Why, if you can't train me in the use of my magic?"

"You must complete the trials so you understand how dangerous your abilities can be."

She snorted. "Oh, believe me. I know *exactly* how dangerous magic can be. There's a dead troll out there that's a testament to that. I've even reminded my professors of that fact, thank you very much. If that's the only reason I need to do this trial of yours, we can just skip it."

"But you cannot."

"I can. If you want to tell me what happened, and I assume Isidora is involved somehow, then do it. I'll listen. I'll even take notes if it'll help you feel better."

"You must complete the trails."

"No, I don't have to do anything of the sort."

"Er, a word, if you would, Aerith?" Professor Fig asked her, tugging her to the side. "Be right back, Percival." When he judged they were far enough away he whispered to her. "Aerith, you have to understand. It's a painting. It's not that bright. It was created to do one thing, and that one thing is about all it's going to be able to do."

"Insist I take this trial?"

"Exactly. By the same token of course it can't teach you. These memories, what magic you find in the trial, and hopefully any more memories they've scattered around are the only thing you're going to get. Take the trial, pay attention, and that may give you some idea of what you can do. That may be all you can hope for."

"Leaving me to figure out a potentially dangerous magic all on my own."

"I'm afraid so. But what other choice do we have?"

"I suppose some idea is better than none."

"That's the spirit!"

She put a hand over her face. "I can't believe I'm going to go through with this. Fine." She walked back to the painting. "Fine, what's the trial?"

"The trail is done in four parts," he explained.

*Because of course it is.*

"To begin, take the book that led you here and place it on the pedestal there."

"Okay?" The two walked up the stairs and set the book down, activating some magic or another which lit up the floor with a sort of hologram, not that either of them knew what a hologram was.

"It's a key!" breathed Professor Fig. "That's why it was gibberish. The contents of the book didn't matter, just those few real pages containing the map. We just needed it to do this. What a fantastic map."

Aerith had to admit, the whole thing, as showy as it was with all the glowing bits and pomp, was rather impressive. "And you can't teach me how you did any of this, I assume? Books that activate magic? This map? Heck this whole chamber I would guess."

The painting ignored her. "You should be able to see the entrance to the first trial on the map."

They scoured it and came up with a tower not too far away.

"I have a painting there, once you arrive I can guide you further," said Percival.

"You couldn't have just told us to look for a tower west of the castle?"

"I could not," the painting agreed.

"Painting," she muttered. "Right. Fine, I guess we'll head over there."

"Your... I'm sorry, who are you two again? We sort of skipped introductions," Percival reminded them.

"I'm Aerith, and this is Professor Fig. He's been helping me on my journey where he can."

"Ah, very nice to meet you, Professor Fig. He may accompany you to the trial but you must take it alone."

"Why?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why? Must I take. The trial. Alone? Will he be instantly killed if he sets foot on that path?"

"No, of course not!"

"Will he not be able to make it because only someone that can see what I can see will be able to avoid various traps that could kill him?"

"Er, not that I recall, no."

"So then he *can* come with me. Glad we had this talk."

"He can not go with you into the trail."

*Paintings.* "Ignoring you now!" She sighed, turning to the man. "You're coming with me into the trail."

"Of course I am," Professor Fig told her. "I'm not missing this for the world. Besides, do you really think I would just say, oh, okay the painting said so, and let a fifteen year old girl face who knows what kind of danger awaits you alone? Don't be absurd."

The pair flew over to the tower, Aerith doing Revelio on the way but then suddenly stopped again.

"The trace! How could I be so stupid!" she told Professor Fig. "The ministry knows someone underage is doing magic outside of Hogwarts!"

"High in the air," he reminded her. "It's not like they can send someone to police the sky. They'll fume about it, but there's not much they can do about it."

"They seemed quite insistent before, even when I was defending the town from trolls. But I guess it's fine. Let's just go, before they do send someone here who looks up."

As they got near the tower Aerith stopped them again. "Hold up, my magic is telling me this a goblin camp now!"

"Goblins!? So, they do have something to do with all this. Let's land and scout the place, it wouldn't do to be seen flying towards them like this."

"Exactly."

The two crept forward, invisible, and from their vantage point could see half a dozen goblins at least prowling around the area. Mostly complaining, by the looks of it. They both stared a moment.

"There's nothing for it," Professor Fig told her. "We may have to fight our way through. Maybe even kill them. Are you prepared for that?"

"Are you nuts?" she hissed. "There could be twenty more where we can't see. Plus, how can you stand there and casually discuss murdering a bunch of goblins in cold blood because they happen to slightly inconvenience us?"

"More than slightly, I would say. I'm not happy about it,"

*You sound pretty happy about it. Do you not like goblins all that much? Is that why you're itching for an excuse to kill them?*

"but what other choice do we have?"

"What other choice- what about the obvious?" She pointed.

## Chapter 20

The First Trial

When: Saturday Afternoon

Where: Outside the tower

Professor Fig looked up to where Aeirth was pointing. This, incidentally, was the giant hole in the side of the tower.

*And what kind of force created such a huge hole, and why wasn't it repaired? To answer the second part of that question, because it happened after the person who lived here left, for whatever reason. Still, goblins can't use brooms... Wait, do I assume that? I have no idea if they can or not. Well, I don't see any brooms but they could build a ladder, right? So have they gotten into the place or not?* “We simply wait until dark, come back on our brooms from that side of the tower either fairly high or as low as possible whichever you think would keep us undetected, and just zip into that hole there. I don't see any ladders next to it, but we can wait here and see if anyone goes in there that way.” *Not that I don't have better things to be doing, by the way.*

“I suppose that would be better than trying to fight our way through,” he admitted. “There are a lot of them.”

*Finally, sanity prevails.* “Good. Are we waiting or leaving?”

“Let's observe for a time, we seem to be fairly well covered here.”

“As you wish.”

The two got a feel for the camp, which seemed to be a lot of standing around rather than actively doing anything, and melted back into the countryside. When they were far enough away they mounted their brooms and took off again. Heading back to the castle he told her to meet him after dinner and they would head back. She said that was fine.

“As for myself, I'm heading back to the map chamber. Imagine, that enormous place under Hogwarts this whole time.”

“Do you think you'll be able to get anything out of Mr. 'you must complete the trial' or something?”

“I just want a look around. On the other hand, who knows what that painting knows? Must know some history he could share. And did you see, those three other panels? I bet there are three other people we might see later. Probably the one I saw with Percival, making that first chamber, and unless I miss my guess two other contemporary professors. Maybe I can get them all out and see if they're any more reasonable about all this.”

“Maybe they can tell us why goblins are hanging around the place?”

“I'll ask. See you later.”

Aeirth spent the time in the Room, carting books she found into her personal space and going through them. She was looking for the oldest books she could find, anything that detailed other forms of magic in history. *But as so few people seem to have the ability, and it seems more an oral tradition than anything else, I highly doubt it. But the room has given me two things I needed already, so why not a third? I just wish that Deek would stop making a mess all over the floor with that stuff he's eating. I mean he'll probably be thrilled to clean it up afterwards, but come on! And if he says I should be proud*

*of all the potions I've brewed **one more time** I'm throwing him out. I mean it. He's senile and Professor Weasley foisting him off on me was not nice. Not nice at all. At least that stupid Floo node is just an object, it doesn't "know" what it's saying. But he does.*

That night the pair went back, flying high over the tower and screaming out of the sky as fast as they dared to get into the tower. They were invisible, but of course the brooms were not, but a tense moment later no alarm seemed to be raised, and they relaxed, looking around. By the moonlight streaming in from the hole in the wall Aerith could make out a work area with even more wonderful looking books, a statue, booms that seemed to be sweeping on their own, and a staircase. The two quickly checked the room for anything interesting, (She wanted to put *all* the books in her book but there would be plenty of time for that later on. They had survived until now, a few weeks or whatever to sort out the goblin situation wasn't that long to wait) but the real prize was the fount of magic she could see. They didn't bother trying to find Percival's painting, the longer they were here the more likely they were to be discovered, and so she silently poked the magic with her wand. A blank section of wall turned into a door, clearly another portal as it was on the tower's outer wall. It would have opened to the outside, not a corridor. They both stepped through, but then turned back.

"How do we keep anyone from following us?" Aerith asked.

"We can't," Professor Fig admitted. "Even if I could move a bookcase or something large enough to block the door, it would be obvious to anyone that came in here what had been done. We need to get in and out."

"Right." She turned and *looked*, fixing this moment in her mind so she could come back here if something happened. The two went forward. The passageway was stone, lit by torches on the right side. The hallway went maybe forty feet and turned right. Directly in front of them was another workspace, with a pile of books Aerith was almost drooling over. There were also cauldrons, boxes, wall hangings, shields, and more clutter around. She stood for a moment itching to look the books over.

"Come on," Professor Fig hissed.

"I have an idea, help me with these!" she hissed back, carefully lifting a box and carrying it over to the desk. She started quickly stacking books into it.

"We don't have time for that!"

"I'm making time. For all we know once we leave here that door will seal again and this area will be lost forever. I don't know how to open the door, do you? It was set up to trigger *once* so someone could get in here, but I can't risk losing access to this. Help me put these books in boxes so I can take them."

"Why not just feed the books in one at a time, don't bother with the box."

"Can't do that. They would count as individual objects. This way it's a box, of books, and only counts as one object."

He seemed like he wanted to protest but as she kept stacking books up he rolled his eyes and started to help her. A moment later all the books were packed and inside her book.

"Now we can go."

They pushed open a set of double wooden doors and stepped into an area both were beginning to associate with Percival. Stretches of marble, a cave system stretching out before them, and some stairs. She noted that strange symbol he liked too, the one from the case and the key. There wasn't anything to jam the door shut with, so they just closed it, hurrying forward. Down the staircase they came to a large hallway with some kind of display nooks on it, with what looked like old urns or at least pottery of some kind, along with golden plates with various symbols on them. Aerith started looting the place.

"What are you doing?" Professor Fig asked her. "Are you looting the place?"

“Standard adventuring procedure, remember? Don’t worry, half of the sale price will go to you, I remember what you said before.”

“That was a joke. You shouldn’t touch that stuff.”

“Why? It’s been sitting here for hundreds of years. No one is going to miss it down here. But up there,” she pointed up, “at least it could be displayed somewhere people can look at it. And if I make a bit of gold selling it, well, that’s just a win for everybody, isn’t it?”

“It is strange,” he admitted, looking around. “Why decorate a place like this that no one is ever going to see?”

“Exactly. Now come on.”

Exiting the hallway they came to another open area, flanked by two gigantic statue. “I mean look at this,” she told him, making a face. “Vanity. And this place isn’t just smooth stone, no no, they practically gilded every millimeter of it.”

“Some kind of shock tactic?” Professor Fig mused. “Showing how powerful their magic is?”

“Showing who? Me? I don’t care. If that painting can’t teach me how he did all this in the first place it’s useless. I can see the magic, I opened the door, don’t make me jump through a bunch of hoops to get to what you want to show me.”

“He did say it was a trial.”

“You see anything trial like yet?”

“No.”

“Bet you we’ll see those statue things before we’re done though. Come on, there’s some stairs here.”

“More magic here,” Aerith told him at the bottom of the stairs. “I’m a poke it.”

“Hold on, is that a treasure chest?” Professor Fig wondered. He pushed the top off a large, fancy box at the base of the stairs. “Huh.”

“What’s this?” He counted out 39 gold coins. “Some treasure. Well, make a mental note of it. I get the odd one, naturally.” *Why even bother though? Was that tiny amount of gold weighing him down so he made this box, dumped the coins in, and forgot to come back to it? Seems unlikely.*

“Why do you get it?”

“I opened the door.”

“That’s fair.” He put half the coins in one pocket and the other half in another. “Go ahead.”

She poked the magic, and something seemed to happen above. “Let’s check it out. Nothing else down here anyway.” The pair headed up, then stared at what they saw. The archway before them was glowing blue, and through it they could see a huge platform. But looking around the columns that held the archway was a quick trip to the abyss.

“How?” Aerith managed.

“I have no idea,” Professor Fig managed, poking a hand through the blue and patting the marble. “It’s real though.” He stuck his head through. “Incredible. Either they found a cave with the exact same features as this one and we’re seeing it through the gateway, or somehow passing through it allows us to interact with invisible matter. Even by the standards of magic this is unbelievable.”

“One second.” She went down the stairs and got the lid from the box, levitating it up. Professor Fig took over, as she was struggling to control the thing and making it lurch around like a drunken monkey, and passed it over, through, and around the area on both sides of the arch. When it went through the arch it acted if the floor was there. But when it didn’t it acted as if it wasn’t. Despite the fact both could look through the arch, or not, and see it occupying the same space. He brought it back and set it down. “Proceed?”

“We have no choice,” Aerith agreed. “Let’s go for it.”

“You have a recent return point, right?”

“Just as we came in, yes.”

“Okay. I’ll go first.” He did, standing on the floor normally, though as he moved and Aerith looked around the arch he was standing on nothing.

“Wonderful. Well, don’t think too much about it I guess.”

“More chests? Is this the trial? To see how greedy we are?”

“A painting can’t be watching us,” Aerith protested. “Let’s see what we have.”

It turned out to be another 52 gold on one side, and 53 on the other.

“Maybe he’s just a practical joker,” Aerith decided. “He was snorting into his beard when setting all this up. ‘oh ho ho, the look on their faces when they get a handful of coins. Chuckle chuckle, guffaw, giggle!’”

“That’s a good impression of him.”

“Thank you.”

Both continued, Aerith a few steps ahead as they neared the next archway. Suddenly Professor Fig yelled and Aerith spun, not sensing any danger to herself. The professor was gone, along with the section of floor they had just been standing on. “Accio!” she cried, running to the edge and looking over. He stopped and was jerked up again.

“Thank you,” he managed after a moment, on his hands and knees at the edge of the platform. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“At least now we know why he said to go alone. Either my crossing this line here made it vanish or it was on some kind of a timer. But it could have dumped me just as easily in that case.”

“Perhaps walking side by side from now on?”

“Agreed.” She held out her hand after passing her wand into her other one, and he took it. She didn’t let go as he got up. “Just in case,” she told him. She looked back. *No way back now, we press forward and win, or I go to my repeat point and we don’t set foot in here at all.*

They continued, the floor doing some sort of weird rippling effect for reasons unknown, and they came to another large room lit by candles and torches with a, you guessed it, archway in the middle.

“What was his obsession with these things?” he asked.

“I’m afraid to speculate,” she told him. “Oh look, more of those statue things. Let’s smash them to pieces.”

“Before they come to life, good thinking.”

The two separated, figuring this room was safe enough as it was a big circular chamber, and smashed up all the stone statues they saw. When done they headed to the far side and checked another chest, this one containing some goggles, of all things.

“I’m... not even going to ask,” Aerith told him. She snapped them on. “How do I look?”

“Ridiculous.”

“Kinda what I thought.” She put them into the book. “More magic here.”

“No more statues, go ahead. That archway will probably have something to do with moving forward.”

“You think?” She poked it. The archway did indeed light up, and showed a passageway now, but only from one side.

“That’s almost more disturbing than the floor thing,” he remarked, walking around it for the third time. “This passageway clearly isn’t here. How did they twist space like this? I mean trunks that have more space on the inside is one thing, but this...”

*Right, he teaches magical theory. It’s worse for him because he knows something like this shouldn’t be possible.*

“Don’t think about. Together?” She held her hand out again.

“Together,” he agreed. They stepped through.

More corridors awaited them, this time with empty pedestals so there was nothing she could loot. *What, was this place not finished? Did someone hide the good silver when they saw me stealing the stuff, I mean liberating the stuff at the front?*

The next chamber featured two normal sized stone statue warriors that started moving at about the halfway point, and another larger one in the center.

“Should have been invisible!” grumbled Professor Fig. “Let’s work together and take them out one at a time.”

“No, do as I do!”

The big one seemed kind of slow, and Aerith used the same Accio trick as before. She simply lined herself up with it and the smaller one behind her, and summoned it. They smashed together and Professor Fig nodded. “I see.” He grabbed the other one, so they were all smashed together. It was then an easy task to use Bombarda to smash them all to pieces at once.

“Well done.”

“Thank you.”

The way forward was behind where the statues were, and they came to a room with a floating platform. Which they ignored, getting their brooms out again and simply flying over to the next area.

“I guess they probably didn’t expect us to have brooms, the people that made this,” Aerith remarked. “The ability to put things into the book is really coming in handy.”

“Agreed.”

“More magic here.” The pair passed through another arch, activating more magic, then had to fly around again as the fence and arch blocked their path. The arch now lead to a dead end, making both of them even more confused as to how this all worked.

Of course there were two more statues in this room, but the pair had learned their lesson and entered invisible. So they just ignored the two, heading down the stairs and into the next chamber. This was a dead end, but the giant archway in this area was a dead giveaway. The magic this time was somehow in mid air, meaning Aerith had to pull the floating platform over to them, but poked it all the same once she did. Once that was done they actually discovered a section of the wall had vanished, allowing them to simply ride their brooms up to the higher level and ignore the arch completely.

They snuck through the next room, not wanting to fight half a dozen statues at once, and again activated more magic in the next chamber.

“How far are we going to go?” Aerith whined. “Did they make these caverns? Find them? They go on forever!”

“Good question. Ah, another floating platform.”

“What does this achieve? They did have brooms in his time, right?”

“I... think so?”

“Let’s just go.”

They scooted over to the far side, ignoring the stupid platforms, and entering the next chamber which Aerith hoped was the end of all this madness. It was a set of stairs and a door, which she opened. This revealed a huge chamber with an enormous treasure box and another door. “This one’s going to be a hundred gold,” she bet. “Maybe two hundred. Look at the size of it!” Both struggled to get the lid off, and looked inside.

“Is that what I think it is?” Professor Fig asked.

“If you think it looks like a healing potion, you’re not wrong,” she told him, holding it up. “A healing potion that has sat here for hundreds of years. Do potions go bad?”

“They are boiled...” he mused.

“Maybe in an emergency then,” she decided, adding it to her supply. “Why did they need this huge chest- I’m not going to ask.”

“Probably for the best.”

“Let’s go.”

The next room was another round platform with nothing but the void on all sides. The pair crept close, invisible and holding hands. They stopped at the edge of the platform and looked around. Nothing. It was empty apart from some weird egg looking things and some columns. Both got on their brooms and zoomed around the cavern, but found nothing. No way out, nothing but the platform.

“There may be another spell you have to release on the platform?” Professor Fig guessed.

“I just have a bad feeling. Let’s set down back over by the door.”

“Right.”

They once again made their way to the edge of the platform and went invisible. Aerith touched a single finger to the platform and suddenly two big statue guardians dropped out of nowhere, ready to engage them. Another six of the smaller ones fell behind them. They looked around stupidly.

“We could knock the ones near the edge off?” Professor Fig suggested.

“No, this is crazy. I’m going to try something.” She made a new point to go back to, and then triggered her return point two back, before they had left the castle. She could feel both points in the “future” still waiting for her, and nodded. “Before we go,” she sweetly asked the painting before her. “How many of these stupid stone guardian things are we going to have to fight? There’s eight of them on what I sincerely hope is the final platform, are more going to appear once we beat them? Maybe an even bigger one, perhaps?”

“How could you possibly know that?” Percival asked her.

“Did we?” Professor Fig asked.

“We did! It was nothing but floating platforms, stone statues, and why a healing potion in the biggest stone box I’ve ever seen? Are you trying to be funny or something?”

“I assure you, this is all very serious.”

“Then let me ask you something. Do you know what a trial is?”

“Of course I do!”

“So tell me why. Why do I have to run down corridors, and jump on platforms, and fight stone statues? What is this trial doing for you?”

“It’s to make sure that a worthy successor inherits the knowledge that lies at the end of the trail.”

“Right, sure. You’ve already said you can’t teach me about the magic so I don’t know what knowledge you’re talking about but sure, I’ll play along. How, *exactly*, does beating up a bunch of statues do that? Show you I’m ‘a worthy successor’ I mean. I’ll wait.”

“Er...” She waited as the painting tried to think of an answer.

“Right. See, here’s the thing. This isn’t a trial. A trial would be...” She thought for a moment. “Okay, I’ve got one. I enter a room. It’s featureless, apart from three things. Before me are two boxes, made of glass. They are barely big enough to fit the person inside them, who is all scrunched up. The boxes are locked with many chains and locks, and there’s a basket overflowing with keys. There’s a set of pipes connected to the boxes that join into one pipe that goes into the ceiling. As I look at them I know certain things about the people inside. The man on the right is a murderer. Because of accident or malice I do not know. I know he is young, has two kids and a wife. He is pleading to be released. On the left is an old man. He could die tomorrow, next week, or next year. But he has lived a blameless life. He too, pleads to be released. From the pipes rushes water, to fill up the boxes. I see a valve that I can use to shut water off to one of the boxes, but this of course sends all the water to the other box. I

must choose one of these men to save and one to die. I know that I could never figure out which key goes to which lock in time to save both. I must adjust the valve and start to work on one of the boxes. Which one do I pick? *This* is a trial. It shows you my character. My thought process. My values. Beating up statues does nothing of the sort. Proving me worthy? Don't make me laugh. Nothing I've seen about this trial proves that in any way. Prove me wrong."

There was a stretched moment of silence.

"I can't. We may have taken the wrong track here with these trials, I'm sad to say."

"He admits it!" Aerith yelled, throwing her hands into the air. "I don't believe this! He's a moron!"

"Now, now, Aerith, a little respect, please," Professor Fig pleaded.

"This," Aerith pointed, "is a painting. Animated, yes, but a painting. The man it represents is hundreds of years dead, and am I within my rights to call him an idiot. He set this whole thing up but in the end, all it shows is if I can solve a few puzzles and beat up some statues. Nothing about how I would use the power *I already have within me*. They can't teach me, nor can they take it away from me. Whether I walk out of here or complete these so called trials the result is the same. I still have to figure everything out on my own. I'm still the same person I was at the beginning. If I was going to abuse the power, beating up statues isn't going to make me not do that, now is it? So I ask again: *What. Is. The. Point???*"

Again. Silence.

"Great. Thanks a lot. For nothing."

"You must... complete the trials?" Percival told her.

"Shut up and let me think."

A moment passed. "What do you suggest?" she asked Professor Fig. "Keep going with this farce? Like you said before it's my only chance to see the past, see what they could do with the power."

"Who do you save?" he asked instead.

"What?" She blinked at him, not knowing where this was coming from.

"The two men. Which one do you choose?"

She shook her head, laughing. "Oh gods, that's what you're worried about right now?"

"You came up with it, I'm curious now."

"I save both of them, of course."

"But you said-"

She held up a hand. "That's the trick, isn't it? I throw the valve to one side, and get to work on one of the boxes. Probably the old guy, the other guy can hold his breath longer if this doesn't go exactly as planned. When the air is almost, but not quite gone I throw the valve to the other side. This buys me time. Hopefully by the time I've gotten the old guy's box open the other box hasn't filled up totally. I throw the valve again, and the water now uselessly spills out of the box I've opened, allowing me all the time I need to save the other man. It wasn't about saving just one. All life is precious. Bet I could use one of the locks and chains as a whip and smash the second box if I absolutely had to. Depends on how accurate the simulation is."

"I see. There's really nothing for it. If you do walk away... I'm afraid those goblins that were outside the tower are looking for something. Something related to all this."

"There is a danger," said Percival. Both heads turned to look at him.

"What?" they both said.

"If there are goblins, and they are looking for something... I was going to wait to reveal this to you, but there is an object you will find at the end of the trails. A very dangerous object. It must be safeguarded. If you do not, and the goblins reach it, that means catastrophe for all of us."

"And you can't just tell me where this object is?"

“I cannot. I’m sorry. I am... limited, in what I can do.”

“Of course you are. Fine. How do I shut down the statues?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“There’s an even bigger one, isn’t there? How do I keep it from attacking me? You must have put in a safety measure in case you needed to go back there for some reason to check it. Would it attack you?”

The painting sighed. “Just beyond the door to the final chamber, if you look at the right side, very far down, there’s a switch. Hit it with a rock or something and you’ll have exactly two minutes the statues won’t move. You can cross the room and get to the other side.”

“But there’s no other side, it’s a circular room.”

“The door would appear with the guardians gone. This will also make the door appear.”

“Thank you,” Aerith said gratefully. “Something helpful at last.” She stepped back into the future, marveling that it had worked as she had never done that before, and pulled the invisible professor back with her. She found a convenient rock in the chamber before that and found the switch Percival had spoken of. “Get ready to run,” she told Professor Fig.

“Run? What are you talking about? Run where?”

“Straight across. You’ll see.” She hurled the rock, and it whacked into the switch. Beyond them the door appeared, along with a bridge over it. “Go!”

## Chapter 21

Coming Clean

When: Sunday Morning

Where: The dorm

Aerith lay on her back, looking up at the bunk above her. She had gone right to bed after clearing the trial, not bothering to go back and see Percival again. Two things had been her “reward” for the effort, something that looked like wand making materials and more memories of the past. Somehow, impossibly, the girl she had seen at the valley turned out to be like her. Able to use this strange magic in some way, and starting Hogwarts as a fifth year. As did Percival. *What are the odds of that? But at least now we know why she was shown, she’s our main character at the moment.* She didn’t seem too worried about revenge for her brother, focused more on her father who was wasting away due to depression. She had heard about the “illness” of course, and treatment was only in its infancy, so of course it wouldn’t have been recognized in Isidora’s time.

*And again these people reach for a magical solution for something that isn’t magic. Or at least she wanted to, but Percival seemingly talked her out of it. I didn’t like the look on her face when she stormed away from him though. Like Anne’s pain. There’s a time and a place for magic, obviously, but some things have to be done the ‘muggle’ way. Ugh, I feel dirty. Sorry. I can’t blame them for not really recognizing the symptoms, even we in ‘the future’ as I like to call the present when I’m thinking about the past, lock people up or do weird things like put leaches on them to ‘cure’ illness like this. Like, really? I need blood, right? Taking it away doesn’t seem like the thing to do in any situation. But I’m not a doctor I’m sure they know what they’re doing. She paused. They do know, right? What they’re doing? Must be. Anyway. She was using her magic to create weird looking pillars I guess as practice. I would make something more useful but that’s just me. What spell was she using? How do I learn it? Just waving my wand around and hoping for the best isn’t going to cut it. To that end, to work I suppose.*

She met her friends at the breakfast table and fended off their insisting she keep her promise. But then she paused. *Hold on. Get them working on it now, and go to see Percival later. Yes. Why not? They won’t need me there. Doing it the other way around just wastes time.* “Okay, change of plans. I’ll tell you now and do what I need to do elsewhere after that. Let me grab something to eat and we’ll be on our way.”

“Now, the Floo node is named ‘Room of Requirement, Aerith’s Section,’” she told her friends, standing at the green flame. It had taken her a few tries to get it right, as going into the Room itself was not possible. There was no node in there, after all. But there was in her section, so asking for it directly was the only way. “State that as your destination, and follow me.” She said it again, and put her hand in the flame.

Stepping back she gave the others room to warp in, which they did, startling Deek.

“Deek wonders what all these people are doing here?” he asked timidly.

“Deek, these are my friends. Jo, Sabrina, Elle, Mary, and Tina. Everyone, this is Deek. He’s been, uh, assigned here, for lack of a better word.”

Everyone was looking around in wonder.

“Deek must remain, Miss, so that another student who knows about the Room doesn’t come along and accidentally or on purpose destroy your section.”

“Oh.” That set her back. *Right. It responds to the need of the user. If someone else came along and needed a tea room, it would become that and all the stuff out there would be gone. Or at least elsewhere. Could I then get it back exactly as I saw it? Maybe not.* “When someone else is here you can leave, in that case,” she told him. “If you have other duties or whatever.”

“Deek is content to remain here.”

“Very well. Anyway, here we are.”

“What is this place?” Elle asked.

“This is a section of the Room of Requirement. Don’t even ask me what that is, I can only tell you what you’re already seeing. But it’s not what I wanted you to see, as impressive as this mostly empty space is. Back the way we came, right through that door.” They filed out, and the stacks and stacks of stuff that met their eyes really blew their minds. They were all chattering away asking a million questions until finally Aerith raised her hands for silence.

“This place is our playground, our mecca, and our curse. Your mission, should you choose to attempt it, is to catalog and organize... this.” She spread her hands wide. “With a focus on the books, of course, I want them all in my area so I can look them over. Anything not useful at the moment can be donated to the school library. We’ll need to empty the shelves, levitate them into my section, and then move the books there. Unless you think you’re good enough at levitation to move them still full of books? I know I’m not, but you can give it a try. Now, you’re asking yourself, what’s in it for me? Good question. Anything you find here you feel would be useful to you, it’s yours. Also, we can use the other room for spell practice, making our own potions, and growing plants. Plus just to hang out and *come on*, it’s a secret base inside Hogwarts castle I’m giving you access to. You can’t say that doesn’t have appeal.”

“What does this have to do with Professor Fig though?” Jo asked.

“Oh boy,” she sighed. “I’ll have to start from the beginning for that. Find some chairs and get comfortable.”

So she told them about her ability to see and use this different type of magic, beginning with the key given to Professor Fig and how it led her to Gringotts. She talked about fighting statues, and seeing memories of the past relating to a girl named Isidora. Not under discussion was her ability to set return points, or her danger sense. A girl has to keep some secrets after all, even from her friends. But she spoke of the attacks from outside the trials as well, the troll and the mystery figure that wanted to get into the vault. “I suspect it was a goblin, perhaps even Ranrok as he showed up almost at once after I arrived there myself. And with that horde outside the tower that led to the first trial, well, that can’t be a coincidence. So there you are. That’s why I entered in my fifth year, why Professor Fig and I hang out all the time, and what I’m dealing with in addition to regular schoolwork. So now you know.”

“You did all that in just your first week here?” Tina asked, shocked. “You must be ready to explode! Or just fall unconscious for three days.”

“I admit, it hasn’t been easy, but what else can I do? I have to see this through. I have to know what I can do, and what Isidora did that was so terrible some old guys went to such extreme lengths to keep it secret.”

“That’s why you want old books,” Mary decided with a snap of her fingers. “To see if you can find any information about this type of magic!”

“Exactly. The Room supposedly gives you what you need, and thus far it’s come through. Even though I didn’t know I needed that wheeled chair I found it here. The brooms, well, I knew I needed those.”

“We’re here for you,” Jo told her. “We’ll help whenever we can, right girls?” They all nodded. “Even apart from maybe finding old spell books with forgotten spells we can use, who knows what we’ll find in all this? It’s a treasure hunt the likes of which no one has ever imagined before!”

“You were going to talk to the painting?” Elle asked her. “Then come here. That’s why you initially said you would tell us later, but you changed your mind...”

She nodded. “Figured I would get you all in here, you can take a look around while I’m gone. Professor Weasley gave me this space but keeping it all to myself seems selfish. I want to share it with you. It’s our space now, not just mine. Please come and go as you please.” *After you do manual labor for me, mu ha ha!*

“Thanks,” the girls all said.

“Of course! Now, I’ll get going so I can get back. Don’t cause an avalanche or anything, some of those stacks are pretty high. I’ll be back soon.”

Moments later she had opened the floor leading down to the map room and made her way to see Percival again. He came into view as she entered.

“Ah, there you are. So the first trial was a success then?”

“I got something strange for my trouble,” she held it out, “but after using the fail-safe in the final room so I didn’t have to fight the guards it was no trouble to get it and the memories. She didn’t stop, did she?”

“Hold on,” said the painting. “Fail-safe? What are you talking about?”

“No need to play coy, professor. You told me about the switch, hit it with a rock and the statues stop moving.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Ah, interesting. So the return points work like that going forward or backwards, do they?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t recall because it never happened for you, but midway through the first trial I came back here. I convinced you the trial wasn’t a trial because just beating up statues is meaningless, and you agreed. You told me how to shut the rest of it down and I didn’t have to fight my way through.”

“You must have been very convincing!”

“I was, in fact. I can recount the whole conversation to you, if you want. But for now, what’s this?” She held the thing up again.

“As you know about the fail-safe, I suppose it won’t hurt to tell you. At the end of the trial is something we needed to keep hidden. Something that relates to Isidora and our use of the intuitive magic. Something we left the strongest guards we could to make sure no one but a person who saw what Isidora did could get near it. That is one part of the fail-safe for that room. You must assemble it, proving you have viewed the memories near it.”

“I see- wait, intuitive magic? You’ve never used that phrase.”

“I was thinking, after your barrage of questions last time, about what I should call this magic and this came to me. We always called it ‘ancient magic’ but you were right, all magic is ancient, so the name doesn’t really fit. This name does for one reason; You didn’t really get a good explanation why I can’t teach you, and I admit I wasn’t thinking very clearly at the time so part of the blame is mine.”

*Wait, a painting is groggy when it wakes up, or something?* “As long as we get there in the end, I’ll forgive you. So why can’t you teach me?”

“This magic isn’t so much about spells, it’s about intent. You’ll see Isidora’s intent in later trials, but you should have seen her early years in the last Pensieve.”

“When she was making those columns in the forest?”

“Exactly.”

“So that wasn’t a spell? She was just using magic to make them appear out of nowhere?”

“That’s correct. You must learn on your own how to manipulate magic in your own way to produce the results you wish. Both with myself and Isidora, our power came from within and expressed itself in the same way. But I would never have thought to do what she did, and so I doubt I could have done what she did. She did what she did by intuition, hence the name, intuitive magic.”

“Makes more sense than ancient magic. This all makes a lot of sense actually, you should have led with that.”

“As I say, you have my apologies. It’s been a long time since I’ve spoken to anyone but the three you may meet later, and my own youth was many years gone when this likeness of me was made. I may just not know how to speak to modern children. As for the others, they still aren’t convinced they should show themselves, given how you acted towards me when we first met. I’ve tried to explain it’s not our time anymore, young people are probably better informed, more opinionated than they were in our time. I’ll bring them around.”

*Sure, whatever. They can’t help me any more than you can, so really it doesn’t matter if it’s just you or three more paintings looming over me. Why did they get painted so large, anyway?* “Intuitive magic. Intent. That sounds like a shortcut to ritual magic. Can I perform the equivalent of a magic ritual but with a wand?”

“I’m not sure I would go that far. Even we could only work with what we saw, what was around us. Ritual magic can reach into the world we cannot see.”

“Right, that’s a good point. I guess I’ll just try and do something I know I can’t do with normal spells, and see what it feels like. Maybe I can teach myself this, now that I know more about what, exactly, this power is.”

“That would be my suggestion as well.”

“Fine. So you know what I know, after I came back here after seeing the final room I said to you...”

Twenty minutes later, after proving she could do what she claimed, Percival accepted her explanation about the glass boxes and the futility of the trials.

“Sadly, the other trials are quite similar,” he explained. “We didn’t think to set them up to really test a person’s character. So you’re right, a person with ill intent could pass them just as easily as one with good intent. I can only hope that if you do have ill intent you’ll see the results of that in the trials and choose a different path than she did.”

“And you’re not just going to tell me what she did, saving me the trouble?”

“I am not.”

“Great! That’s... just great.”

“Is it? Ah, someone’s coming.”

“Humm?” Aerith turned to see Professor Fig coming down the stairs. “Ah, good morning professor!” she called, waving to him.

“Good morning!” he called back. “And to you, Percival.”

“Good morning. Your student and I have been trying to see things from each other’s point of view. I think we’ve made good progress.”

“That’s excellent news! Don’t allow me to interrupt.”

“I was just trying to get him to simply tell me what Isidora did to necessitate all this. He refused, as is his right I suppose. I’ll need to complete the trials. I would anyway, to get the key to unlock whatever is at the end of all this. This is part of it.” She showed him what they had found at the last site.

“Oh, is that what that is. I did wonder. So what’s next? The second trial?”

“We could jump straight into it, of course,” Percival admitted. “But there is something you may want to do first.” He looked at Aerith.

“What’s that?”

“Strengthen your connection to intuitive magic.”

“Oh, that’s what we’re calling the type of magic they did,” Aerith told Professor Fig. “Because it doesn’t use specific spells, just intent like a ritual.”

“Extraordinary.”

“Sorry, go on, professor.”

“Yes. In my time there were natural ‘springs’ if you will of raw power that could be absorbed by those like us who could see them. I must assume they exist in your time as well, they were everywhere in mine. Visiting these sites and collecting the magic from them allowed us to perform larger and larger workings. If you truly do wish to create doors that lead to different places and construct your own guardians, you will need the power these springs provide.”

“That’s going to be a problem,” Aerith admitted. “I wanted to ask you about that too, Professor Fig. Your task for me, mapping out the landscape with Revelio. Unless you’re going to come with me every time I need to leave the castle to do something, we’re going to have to work something else out. Perhaps some sort of blanket permission for me to leave? I would still have to be careful of the trace of course, but like you said while in the air there’s nothing the ministry can really do.”

“It’s true,” he mused, looking down. “I can’t follow you around the countryside all the time, I have grading to do and lesson plans to put together. But to get permission from our so called headmaster... Maybe Matilda would go for it, but not without an explanation.”

She laughed. “That’s easy to fix. Let’s give her one. Bring her down here, show her what I’ve already done. I mean she can’t deny it, once she knows I’m not just running around out there, but instead am burdened with *glorious purpose*.”

“The fewer people that know about us, the better,” cautioned Percival.

“Why?” Aerith demanded, starting to get annoyed again.

“Because of what you can do, of course.”

“That’s just it, I can’t do anything yet but see a bit of sparkly magic. And I turn the argument back on you. Even if a person knows what I can do, what are they going to do about it? Okay, we tell Professor Weasley that intuitive magic exists. Professor Fig here knows it exists. Doesn’t mean he has access to it. Only someone born to it, like us, can use it. I mean unless you’re worried about someone taking me over with a curse or something...”

“That is, sadly, possible,” Professor Fig acknowledged. “One of the unforgivables can do just that.”

“I can’t live my life in fear of being turned into someone’s slave,” she protested. “And this is Professor Weasley we’re talking about here. Do you really see *her* doing that?”

“...No,” he admitted.

“Good. In any case it doesn’t matter. The ability is mine, the risk is mine. None of you really get a say in it, especially a painting. Sorry! (not sorry) I choose to trust her, and really we have no other choice if we want to proceed both with me finding these springs and you getting an answer to how widespread the Ranrok movement is. Right?”

“She has a point,” Professor Fig decided. “The risk is hers to take. Very well, I’ll go get Matilda right now, may as well get this over with. See you in a few moments.” He started up the stairs again.

“You’re quite strong willed, aren’t you?” Percival asked her after a moment of her looking around in silence as they waited.

“I suppose,” she agreed.

“I’m not sure if that’s good or bad,” he went on. “You may need a strong will to resist the temptations of what the trials show you. I know you probably see me as just an old man, not that I’m even that anymore. A... relic of the past, trying to tell you what to do. I know trying to tell Isidora what to do caused so I’m trying not to go down that same road with you. But you must understand the forces you can call upon are dangerous. Far more dangerous than you know. Please, give me a chance, give

the trial a chance. It was all we had. Maybe you can think of a better solution going forward, but for now we're stuck with it."

"I'll try," she allowed.

"That's all I can ask for," he realized. Both fell into silence once again.

Dear Diary,

I got special permission to leave the school! Can you believe it?????

It took some doing, but after Professor Fig brought Professor Wesley down to talk to the PP (that's Percival Painting) she agreed this was important enough to write me up a special pass. She reluctantly handed it over, with warnings about not abusing it so my studies fall behind and such. As if. Of course she doesn't know I can do hours of homework in only one hour, but I will have to be careful. I'm being pulled in a lot of different directions at once. Professor Fig wants me to see how many Ranrok camps are out there so he can convince the ministry he's more of a threat than they know. As apparently my strengthened Revelio spell can do that when I'm in the air. PP wants me to strengthen my magic by searching out 'wellsprings of power.' I have to figure out how to actually use this intuitive magic I've been given. Plus schoolwork during the day, plus homework at night. Plus cleaning the Room out, sorting the books. I don't think I'll find any books on intuitive magic as it's, well, intuitive! It's right there in the name! But maybe someone in history could do this and wrote down their thoughts on the whole process?

Anyway, she let me go, but did caution, and allow, me to bring someone else when I go! This makes sense, and it would be nice to get to know the other girls outside of class. Maybe I should start some kind of bidding war... Just kidding! Everyone should get a chance to go with me, it's only fair.

There is still the trace to worry about. If I do any magic off the Hogwarts grounds I'm liable to face the wrath of the ministry as they swoop in to spot the 'ruthless lawbreaker' that's skulking around. (i.e. me) Please. I wonder if my magic could cancel it out for a time? Maybe enchant a stone to create a "bubble" of "anti-trace" magic around me, so whoever I take can use magic outside too? The problem is the only test I can do is destructive. If I mess it up I'm out there breaking the rules for everyone to see. Maybe Professor Fig can talk to George and get me some further exemption? That would be nice. I wonder if intuitive magic would even show up? Our ritual didn't, but that may have been too close to Hogwarts to count as "outside the castle." It's not a spell, and from what I've been told something like drinking a potion or putting on an enchanted hat wouldn't trigger it. So it's not just the use of magic by an underage person, it's specifically casting a spell. I wonder...

My friends and I spent the whole day (we got our homework done yesterday, don't worry) in the Room. So. Many. Books. And dust. We need a dusting spell! Or would that be an anti-dusting spell? Anyway. There's a lot of neat stuff in the room, including paintings that were overjoyed to be found and hung up again in the halls. There are already so many hung by the central staircase a few more won't be noticed, so we took care of that too. One insisted on staying, saying the quiet was what they wanted and to please leave them to it. To each their own, I guess. Otherwise the Room has just about everything you can imagine, from spinning wheels to woodcarvers tools. More than we could ever move ourselves, nor would we want to move for example a blacksmith's anvil. What would we do with

it, and how did it get there in the first place? So most things will just stay right where they are, but at least put into the catalog so we know it's there. We'll probably sort things out a bit for we're still just exploring the place to be honest. That can come later, we've got the whole school year.

My goodness, it's only been a week! What is the second week going to do to me?

## Chapter 23

Fuzzies

When: Monday Morning

Where: The Great Hall

“Anne!” shouted Aerith as a familiar figure rolled up to their table at breakfast. She jumped up and scooted down to the end of the table so Anne didn’t have to get up. She could just roll up to the end of the table and sit there. The others followed, all smiles. “You’re here! How are you?”

“Tired,” she admitted with a smile of her own. “Hi, everyone. For once I didn’t sleep because of excitement, not just because of the pain.”

“Excitement about coming back to school?” Tina mused. “What a strange thing.”

“Don’t mind her. Are you doing okay?” Jo asked.

“Well enough. I think the chair is really going to help, thanks again for that Aerith.”

“Of course-”

“Anne?” said another voice. A male voice. Sebastian sprinted over to her, shock written plain on his face. He stared at his sister. “What... How?”

“Surprise,” she told him, spreading her arms. “Your sister. Is back. Are you shocked? You are, aren’t you? Well, you’re not getting away with anything now! What *did* you do to make Uncle so upset with you, anyway?”

“Never mind that, what is this?” He was looking the chair over from every angle.

“Aerith got it for me over the weekend. It’s a chair that moves itself. I have no idea where she pulled it out of, but I wasn’t going to complain. I just hope some poor person with only one leg isn’t going to come hopping after me. We think if I don’t have to walk around the school I might be able to manage attending classes again. I hope so, sitting around at home was *boring*. I’ll even take a history class over that.”

“Ten sickles says you’ll regret saying that after the first one!” Sabrina announced.

“Make it the second one and you’re on, girl!”

“Done!”

*I can see why everyone around here loves and is rooting for this girl, and wanted her back. She’s a little powder keg, isn’t she?*

“Aerith did this?” he repeated, looking at her.

“Yeah, she’s great. Organized a get together with all my friends to cheer me up, and when she learned what was wrong tore off back to the school to get this. Have you met her?”

“We’ve... met,” he managed. “In fact, a word, if you please.” He jerked his head in a “come on” motion.

“Save me a bagel or something,” she called, going with him.

“No promises,” Anne shouted back at her. “Our Uncle’s cooking is terrible, I’m starving! Someone get me one of those, and one of those, oh and two of those!”

Sebastian dragged her over into a side hall, and glared at her.

“What?” she asked him. “Didn’t you want your sister back at school or something?”

“No, of course I did. I think it’s great. It’s you I don’t get.”

“What do you mean?”

“You show up here, supposedly not from another school but yet, somehow able to beat me in a duel. After that I thought you would crow about it endlessly but no, my friends said they didn’t hear you talk about it at all. Then you got our club shut down. And again, I thought ‘here we go, this will do it’ and the story would be all over the school by the next day. But again, nothing. And beating the both of us when we... you know? Not a word. Everyone finally realized I didn’t have my wand but they didn’t know what happened. You kept quiet about it. Like you were trying to make sure I didn’t get harassed for it. Or worse, beaten up when it got out we, uh, you know, sort of ganged up on a girl. Probably there are some people here that would have gotten on our case about that. But no, they still don’t know the story. Then even after I did do... what I did... you go *completely out of your way* to help my sister. I just saw her *smile* again. I didn’t think...” He rubbed his eyes. “I never thought I would see that again. But she’s here, because of you. Who are you? You don’t act in any of the ways I would have expected. Not at all.”

She glanced down at his Slytherin patch. “Well, maybe you’ve just met some really crummy people in your life, Sebastian. And for that, I’m sorry. Let me give it to you straight; You screwed up. You put others in danger with your actions and you got called out for it. Then you put *me* in danger with some half thought out plan of revenge. That’s on you. I’m not blaming your sister for it, so of course I’m going to help her if I think I can. That’s what people *do*. Or at least, what they should be doing. Helping each other. And I’ll continue to help her in every way I can. What happened to her was terrible, but I can’t fix that. All I can do is try to help her move on, learn to deal with her situation as is, and get her back on her feet. So to speak.”

“This isn’t some convoluted plan to get back at me by getting my sister here and pushing her down some stairs or something, is it?”

Her eyes widened in shock. “What? How can you even-”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Sorry, sorry, of course not. See, it’s just how people... How I... think. I’m kinda screwed up, aren’t I?”

She shrugged. “If you think you are, maybe that’s the first step to getting un-screwed up.”

He stared at her in silence for a moment. “You’re right. And here’s the second. I won’t have her hearing about it from others, I have to make it right.”

He nodded as he went past her, and walked up to the podium in front of the hall. He banged on it, getting the attention of at least the people nearest, and the professors, who ate closer to it on a sort of platform away from the students.

*What’s he doing?*

“Everyone, can I have your attention for a moment?” He waited until everyone quieted down and was looking at him. “Thank you. This will only take a moment.”

“What? I can’t hear you, speak up!” someone yelled from the back.

“This will only take a moment!” he said louder. “I wanted to make a public apology. As some of you may know, there was a dueling club some of us were a part of, that got shut down. Originally I was furious about this, and I did some things I’ve come to regret and see as wrong. I was rightfully punished for my part in that. The club... was a mistake. Someone could have been hurt, or worse, killed. Magic isn’t something to mess around with, and maybe I just was asleep in class that day when it was mentioned but I should have known better. We all should have. Learning to defend oneself, that’s a good and even noble thing to do, as our Defense teacher will no doubt tell you.” He looked back and she nodded her head, gesturing to go on. “But we have to do it safely. We should have asked, and had a professor on hand in case something went wrong. What I did when I learned it had been shut down, which I will not detail, was wrong. I ask now, please don’t let our mistake be the end of it. Clearly there is interest in a dueling club. That’s like, asking for extra homework, isn’t it? I would like to ask that an official one, where we can safely practice what we learn in class, is created. Even if those of us in the unofficial one are not allowed to join, others should be allowed to. Again, I’m sorry for my part in this,

and for what I almost did to the person that pointed it out to me. That's all I had to say, thanks for listening."

He trudged back to his table, his friends clearly shocked at what he had done. Anne was wheeling over there, probably confused as heck as to what was going on. Aerith was as well, watching from the corner. *He just went up there and apologized. In front of everyone. Said he made mistakes and regretted it. Wow. Maybe he's not such a bad sort after all. And I guess he's kinda cute. I'm certainly not as mad at him as I was, after a stunt like that. If you give people a chance, they can surprise you, I guess. Wait did I just think he was cute?? I better get back to my table.*

That day was her first Care of Magical Creatures class, which she went to outside. Various pens containing animals were set around the perimeter, and five tables with no chairs served as desks for the "classroom." There was only one wall, the back wall of part of the castle unless Aerith missed her guess, propping up the usual chalkboards that adorned every classroom since the beginning of time. *What do we do in the winter?* she asked herself. *This place will be covered with snow in no time. Maybe there's magic to keep the snow away?* As she was looking around a shorter girl, brimming with happiness and carrying a harry ball almost bigger around than she could handle took her place next to her.

*And who is this mischievous pixy? She certainly seems happy to be here, what a cute smile she has.*

"It's not polite to stare, you know," she teased.

"I was just thinking how cute your smile was-" Aerith froze and felt her face heating up. *Why in the world did I say that?*

The girl laughed. "You're pretty cute too, when you're pretending to be a tomato."

"Welcome everyone!" shouted the professor, coming into view. She was wearing an apron full of tools, and had on what looked like protective gear on her lower arms made of thick leather. Aerith quickly turned away, thankful for the timely intervention of fate. *What is wrong with me?*

The professor gave a short speech about being careful around beasts, and said they would start with basic care today to ease back into it from the break.

"Miss Sweeting, if you would like to assist our newcomer with today's lesson, as you've already taken a place at her side?"

"Of course professor!" she happily replied. "Hi, I'm Poppy. Of course I know who you are, Aerith! And this little ball of fluffiness is Gerald. Say hello, Gerald!" She lowered her voice. "Hello, Aerith, nice to meet you."

*Her name is Sweeting? Wow, that's a little on the nose isn't it?* "Nice to meet you too, Gerald. I hope you've been having a nice summer."

"Are you kidding?" Poppy went on, fully invested now. "I hate summer. You see all this fur? It's murder on me, murder I tell you!" She fell to laughing. "I can't keep that up, thanks for playing along."

"Sure thing. It's nice to meet you as well." The two shook hands. "Now, tell me all about these fantastic beasts, and where to find them. Or at least this one. Yes, hello there!" Gerald was nuzzling her, trying to get headpats. "Yes I'll pet you, okay, okay, hi!"

"I guess he likes you, that's a good sign. So he's a puffskein, and they're pretty easy to take care of. They need plenty of brushing, here I have an extra one if you don't," she handed Aerith a brush, "and I've got some food pellets here you can feed him. That's the basics of care of magical creatures."

"That doesn't seem too bad," she admitted, taking the brush and stroking the creature. It wiggled in delight and flipped over, not that you could really tell one end from the other.

She finished brushing the little guy and fed him, and Professor Howin said they could now select one of the pens and see what they could do with a larger beast. Aerith helped clean up, sweeping

the fur from the table into the nearby canister and handed the brush back. "Oh no, keep it," Poppy told her.

*I could probably find one in the room somewhere, but* "If you insist?"

"I do."

"Thanks." She put the brush in her book and turned to the pens behind the tables. "Now, let's see what catches my..." She caught sight of a boy that looked like he was in the process of using Accio on one of the cat looking creatures in the pen. It didn't seem happy about it. Poppy didn't either, also catching sight of it and putting her hands over her mouth in shock. "...attention one second please." She whipped her wand out and pointed it at the boy. "Accio!" His wand flew out of his fingers and he jumped, startled. Aerith stalked over to him as he spun, and his eyes widened as he saw the fury in hers. And the wand that was literally glowing and pointed in his direction. She got up in his face and brandished his own wand, shaking it at him. "That's not... What this... Is for..." she managed. "If I ever see you mistreating a living creature like that again, I won't just snatch the wand out of your hand I'll *blow your hand off*. Do you understand me?"

"How are you doing that?" he squeaked, eyes darting between her face and her wand.

"Do you understand?" she repeated with steel in her voice.

"Yes! Yes! Sorry, didn't know there was a, a, whatever these things are, lover here or whatever."

He snatched his wand back and backed away from her. "Psycho. Come on," he said to the girl who was standing behind him. Aerith stared daggers at her too, standing there and doing nothing. She swallowed, managed a "sorry!" and rushed to get as far away from the girl with the glowing wand as she could.

"Morons," Aerith spat, trying to calm herself. She looked down and her wand was glowing, swirling with magic which was now fading as her emotions calmed. *Huh, never done that before.*

"That was so *amazing!*" Poppy told her. "You saw that jerk messing with Persephone and zip, stole his wand right away from him. Even put him in his place. Were you, like, *trying* to make me fall for you or something? Because I have to say well done, but you don't have to try that hard we only just met."

"What?"

"What?" Poppy seemed to realize what she had said. "Oh, uh, let me introduce you!" She opened the pen and went inside, holding the fence open so Aerith could join her. "This is Persephone, she's a kneazel. Oh!" She and the other two, looking like house cats of enormous size and fluffiness came over to Aerith and were head butting her and rubbing her legs. "Oh wow! Kneazels are excellent judges of character. I've never seen them act like this towards anyone. Wow!"

"You said that." She dropped to one knee. "Hello big guys, yes, I'll pet you too. Plenty of pets for everyone."

"The nerve of that guy," Poppy went on staring at him and he gave a start as Aerith glanced in his direction too, turning away. "Trying to rip out your whiskers like that. Are you okay Persephone?"

"I'm fine now that you're here Poppy!" Aerith said, doing a high voice. "That nice girl over there saved me, she's my hero now!"

She laughed. "Oh no, is that really what I sound like when I do a voice for an animal? No wonder everyone thinks I'm mad. I'm just learning all sorts of things today aren't I?"

"Then it's a good day, isn't it?"

"Yeah, yes I guess it is," she answered softly.

With the kneazels also brushed and fed, Poppy talking a mile a minute about how to trim their claws, what they liked to eat, how their coats change with the seasons, and more, class was about over. *This girl really knows her animals, huh?* She quickly introduced Aerith to the other beasts in the pens, namely birds that could vanish and reappear elsewhere and more puffskeins, and the professor called her over.

“So, how was your first class?” she asked.

“Quite good, thank you. I hope you didn’t mind me stepping in with the kneazel.”

“Humm, on the one hand, as a professor, I should probably say something like ‘let me handle it the next time.’ I had noticed and was walking over. But you only had eyes for the beast, and perhaps Poppy?”

“I don’t know what you mean?” Aerith almost managed without blushing all over the place.

“Play it cool, that’s the way. On the other hand, you saw something wrong, and you acted to fix it. I can’t fault you for that. If more people were like you, perhaps we wouldn’t have so many poachers in the area as we do.”

“Poachers?”

“Yes,” she spat, looking angry. “All under Rookwood’s command. They’ve become very bold as of late, for some reason. Almost as if something is driving them to disregard all pretense of simply observing the beasts and they’re now taking them. I fear more beasts vanish by the day.”

*Rookwood. Poachers. Ashwinders? Ranrok. Searching. Trolls and dragons under their command? What’s the connection?* “And the ministry does nothing about it, I assume?”

“Ha! You assume correctly. Useless, the lot of them. But I can’t exactly... Never mind. Now, I wanted to thank you for getting along with Poppy.” She gestured and the two looked, Poppy was getting some more cuddle time in with the puffskeins. “She’s such a bright and cheerful girl and she clearly loves the animals we work with in class, but she still doesn’t seem to have any friends. This is the happiest I’ve ever seen her, she clearly seems to have opened up to you a little. Never heard her talk so much either..”

“We do seem to get along.”

“That’s good. Well, keep up the good work and I’m sure you’ll do quite well in class. That’s all I wanted to say.”

“I’ll see you next time, professor.”

“Good day.”

Poppy looked up and ran over, securing the gate of course, as Aerith headed back to the castle.

“Wait up, can I walk with you?” she asked shyly.

“Of course! What a great class, I really think I’m going to enjoy it.”

“Wasn’t it! Apart from that awful boy of course. Thank you again for doing what you did. I’ve never seen anything like that!”

“I may have overreacted a little? I got both scolded and praised by Professor Howin. Is that scolded or praded I wonder...”

She giggled. “Something like that. You really are an augurey at noon in the desert, aren’t you?”

“I... don’t know what that is?”

“An augurey is a bird that brings rain. Or at least proceeds it? They only fly during rains so it’s hard to know if they cause them or simply follow them.”

“Ah, then it is a good thing!”

“It is. The saying is just something my gran and I say. It’s like, someone or something is a welcome surprise. Wait a moment.” The two girls had reached a crossroads, with one path, the path Aerith was going to take, back to the castle. The other led away from it, towards the woods.

“What is it?” she asked, looking around. There didn’t seem to be anything around.

“It’s a question of trust,” Poppy said mysteriously.

“Trusting... me?” she asked.

“Um hum,” she hummed, nodding and looking Aerith over. “I’ve never told anyone this. You see, I have a secret.”

“Tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine!” *But the Room isn’t exactly a secret, well, I guess it is just among my friends. And it seems she’s joined those ranks rather quickly.*

“Deal!” Poppy decided with a grin. She grabbed Aerith’s hand and pulled her towards the forest. “Come on, we don’t have much time we have to get to our next class. But I can introduce you.”

“Introduce?” She allowed herself to be pulled along, wondering what she had gotten herself into.

“You’ll see,” she promised with a laugh. “It’s not far.”

They stopped well out of the forest and Poppy had Aerith step back, then put her fingers to her lips and whistled.

They waited.

“Wait for it,” Poppy told her. “Wait for- there!” She pointed, and Aerith saw a white, winged, creature of some kind bursting forth from the trees. It spiraled around them, coming to land before Poppy.

“This is Highwing!” she announced proudly. “Isn’t she just magnificent?”

“She certainly is. It seems you’ve jumped ahead in class a bit, haven’t you?”

“I guess you could say that,” she agreed slyly. “Go on. Introduce yourself. But there is one rule with hippogriffs. Oh, she’s a hippogriff, did I mention that? You must show them deference before you approach.”

“I think I take your meeting,” she allowed. She walked up to Highwing, trying to judge where she started to get a bit nervous, and stopped. She bowed. A second or two later Highwing nodded her head, accepting Aerith.

“Wonderful, thank you Highwing. This is Aerith, she’s just the most amazing person I’ve ever met! We don’t have a lot of time would you like some brushing? Would you?” She turned. “I guess so! Come on, you can help if you want.”

They both got out brushes and brushed her, and Poppy gave her some large pellets. “Of course she prefers large rats, fish, the occasional fox or a deer if it’s been a few days. We don’t have time now, but maybe over the weekend she’ll agree to give us a ride.”

“I’d like that!”

“I’m not asking you out on a date or anything I just thought you, wait, did you say you would like that?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Oh. Well. Okay then. We can see how she feels then. Go on Highwing, thanks for coming!” She took off flying.

“Wow, look at her go. I’ll look forward to flying with her. How did you ever meet her, anyway?”

“I sort of rescued her from poachers a few years ago. Got her to safety, or so I thought-”

“Hang on, a few years ago? Aren’t you the same age as me?”

“...Yes?”

“So let me get this straight. When you were twelve or something you took on a bunch of poachers and won? Poppy, you aren’t giving yourself enough credit here! You’re the amazing one! I couldn’t have done anything like that at twelve.”

“It wasn’t... like that.”

“If you say so. Come on, we should get back.” They both started walking. “You said, or so you thought?”

“Right. There’s been increased poacher activity in the area.”

“So the professor said. I wonder...”

“What is it?”

“It’s part of the secret I owe you. Mine is a little bit bigger than a hippogriff, mind. My magic... Suffice to say I’ll tell you the whole story later. Maybe tonight after dinner? I have a task from Professor Fig to make out- to map out the goblin camps in the area. I wonder if I could ‘see’ poacher

camps as well. When we present our findings to the ministry they would have to take action if I could tell them right where the camps are.”

“He has *you* doing this? What, are you secretly a British secret agent or something?”

She laughed. “Nothing like that. It’s just something I can do. You’ll understand after I tell you the whole story.”

“Sounds like a good one. Look, if there’s anything I can do to help, just name it. If you’re going to be helping put poachers away, count me in.”

Aerith thought of stacks and stacks of book. “You know, you may just come to regret saying those words...”

## Chapter 24

The first night out

When: Monday evening

Where: Leaving the castle

Aerith headed out of the castle gate, nervously looking around. She was carrying her new broom, and had her special pass in her hand in case anyone stopped her. They didn't. In fact they hardly gave a glance in her direction as she stepped out of the massive doors and closed them behind her.

*What was I worried about?*

The sun was going down but she figured she had just enough time to get to the village and take care of the most important thing on her mind at the moment. Getting rid of the antiquities she looted from the underground chamber and making some money. Now that she had the space, she wanted to buy potion ingredients, seeds, and spellcrafts for the Room. Even if she couldn't sell the products of her labors just yet, any one of those disciplines, once mastered, could be a potential career path. Now that she had magic, and by all accounts strong magic that could become even stronger as she visited the 'wells' Percival had spoken of, she wasn't going to settle for a mundane job. Or being a baby maker, for that matter. For the first time in her life she had *options*, and she was going to explore them and make something of herself.

*Though why I am suddenly leaning towards the care of magical beasts as a career path? Total mystery. Can't explain it. Wonder if the Room could make me a big empty field?*

The broom she had clutched in her hand was a gift from Professor Fig, delivered by owl that day with a note:

"Here's a better broom you can use for that task I spoke to you about. Should be a bit faster than the one you were using. I still urge caution however, don't get too close!"

*And how does an owl that weighs less than two kilograms fly with a broom weighing twice that amount? Are they bred to be stronger than usual, or are packages charmed to weigh less while being carried by owls?*

Wasting no time she used the Floo node to travel to the village, put the broom away, and headed to the home of Mugustus Pinkfeather, a contact also given to her by Professor Fig. She was sure she had the right house and knocked on the door.

"Yes?" asked the person who answered.

"Hello, Mr. Pinkfeather?"

"Ah, you must be Aerith! Come in, come in, Eleazar's note said you would be dropping by." He stepped aside to let her in, and she entered the home. Many items, not unlike hers, were on display all over the place, so this was clearly the man to see.

"Thank you, Mr. Pinkfeather."

"Please, call me Mugustus. Or just Gus is fine. Come, we can sit in the living room and you can show me what has Eleazar so excited. Tea?"

"That would be fine, thank you." *Excited? He just looked disgusted when I was looting- I mean liberating the items. Changed his tune a little then? Maybe he's hoping for that even split he spoke of?*

They sat down and Mugustus poured tea as Aerith tumbled the items she had take from the trial out of her book. Of course she hadn't brought all of them, some of the nicer pieces she now had set up in the Room as a keepsake. But right now she needed gold more than she needed these items.

"Ah yes," Mugustus purred, "very nice examples of the era. Well preserved, should fetch a good price." He swiftly picked up each piece, examined it, set it aside and took up the next piece. "Eleazar told you how I operate?"

"Yes sir. You'll take the items, place them into the next auction, then if they sell you'll take a commission and give me the rest."

"Exactly. Let me get you a receipt so I know what's yours." He got out parchment and started to write. "One golden decorative plate, 20 centimeters, embossed with the figure of a dragon. One porcelain vase, black, gold trimming..." He went on, giving a brief description of each item in a very professional way. When done he had her read it over, they both signed it, and he set a blank parchment down on the one he had just written. One spell later he handed her the copy which she put into her book.

"That was easy," she remarked.

"I do try to keep things professional," he agreed. "And I've been doing this a long time. Any other questions for me, then?"

"Professor Fig said auctions happen once a month, so you'll have news in a few weeks?"

"That's right."

*Too slow, but what else do I have?* "Great! I'll look forward to hearing from you. It was nice to meet you!"

"Nice to meet you too. Come on back if you find any more treasures out there!"

"I will. Have a good evening."

She was shown out and nodded. *That wasn't too bad at all. But how do I make money in the short term? I have referred some people to Mr. Hill for his new line of skirts, but they have to wait until they can come to the village to be fitted. I wonder if I could take their measurements, bring the orders to him, and then pick up the finished product when it's ready? But even more immediately, is there any unattended treasure around here?* She was about to cast Revelio to see if there was anything of interest nearby but dropped her wand only halfway out of the loop at her belt like it was a hot potato. *What am I thinking? Do I want the ministry here hassling me? No I do not. Let's go.*

She took to the sky, outside the village as was polite, and now high above the ground got out her book and wand. "Revelio!" she cried, swiping her wand in the correct way through the air. Her magical senses lit up, telling her where nearby things were, and she headed towards the nearest. She repeated this for some time, even after the sun went down, coming to a very disturbing conclusion. *Ranrok camps, and poacher camps if what I'm seeing is correct, are everywhere. I've only covered a small part of the surrounding countryside but I've already found eighteen of them. If I take the number of goblins I saw at the tower as a rough guide, there's probably between ten and twenty people inside each camp. That's one hundred eighty to three hundred and sixty. Let's say I've found a third of them, as I still have a lot of ground to cover. That's, ugh the math is getting a bit hard we'll use round numbers, six hundred to twelve hundred people total. Walking around Hogsmeade did I see a thousand people? Now many people may not be in the streets of course, but those are still some scary numbers. If there are an equal number of Ranrok followers out there to Hogsmeade residents here, we would be totally overwhelmed if they decided to attack. Oh sure, everyone around here is a wizard, but are they a combat wizard? Of course not. Most took Defense class years and years ago. Some as many as fifty or sixty years ago! No wonder the ministry doesn't want to do anything, maybe they know the numbers already? I have no idea how many people work there but they too could be totally outmatched.*

*The one thing we have on our side is the fact they're spaced fairly far apart. That tracks, if they really are looking for whatever Percival said was created in the past. If a specific camp was raided quickly enough that someone couldn't just vanish and return with help, they could be taken one at a time. But that would require a lot of coordination.*

She was lost in thought as she returned to the castle, but not so much she didn't spot the figure sitting by the boathouse on the lake. *Somewhat pushing the 'don't leave the castle' rule a little, I mean it's sort of right there isn't it? But at the same time it's pretty far away. What are they doing here?* She dropped down, noticing they were looking down at the water.

"If you don't want to swim alone—"

"Yaha!" the figure yelled, revealing herself a girl. She jumped a bit, falling backwards.

"Sorry!" Aerith yelled to her. "Are you okay?"

"Don't do that!" the girl yelled back, standing up. She looked around.

"Up here."

"Up?" She finally looked up. "There you are. Do you make it a habit to sneak up on people?"

"It's more of a hobby than a habit."

The girl snorted. "It's a good thing I didn't fall in the water, or you would be fishing me out."

"I doubt it's very deep here," Aerith countered, carefully touching down and automatically opening the book to allow the broom to be sucked into it. She looked the girl over, Slytherin robe, bangs, somewhat large nose for the face. *Not like the pixie it all.*

"A Ravenclaw with a book at her hip. I've heard about you, you're the new girl. Aeris, right?"

"Aerith, actually."

"Well I was close. I'm Nerida. Sneaking out, are you?"

"Actually no, I'm coming back. I've been flying for hours, a quick dip would be fantastic. Want to join me?"

"I can't," she muttered, sitting down again. "That's really the whole problem, isn't it? Don't even know what I'm doing here to be honest. The offering is just as out of my reach sitting here as it is in my dorm room."

"You can't be allergic to water, can you?" she asked, sitting next to the girl.

"Allergic to water?" She started at her, then let out a laugh. "That's a good one. No, but I can't swim."

"But you want to? And what's this about an offering?"

"If you must know, I left a gift for the merpeople which was accepted. They returned my gift with one of their own, but I think they think I know how to swim. So they put it in a cave you can only get to from underwater just over there." She pointed. "It was all in the name of improving human/merperson relations but I've gone and screwed it up all."

"Hold on, we have mermaids in the lake?" Aerith asked excitedly. "Have you seen them? Can I see them? What do they look like, are they gorgeous?"

"Don't get your hopes up," Nerida cautioned. "They aren't what you think. Pretty, naked girls with tails? No, they're most beast than that. But they have language, I know it. I mean I'm learning it. I mean I'm trying to learn it. My real hope is one day to be their liaison with the wizarding community. So I thought I would start straight away. Didn't really think it through, to be honest. Learn to swim first, *then* go talk to the fish people. Stupid, Nerida, as usual."

"Come on, you're not stupid," Aerith protested. "just a bit overzealous. That you were able to get in touch with them and exchange something is pretty amazing, actually. And it's in a cave just over there, you say..."

"Wait, are you... Are you offering to go get it for me?"

"I do feel bad about scaring you earlier. Like I said I could go for a dip anyway, may as well help you out at the same time."

"I would really be grateful, are you sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. You'll have to watch my book, can't exactly take it with me."

"Of course!"

"Okay then." Aerith stood up and started taking her clothes off.

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm not going to swim in my clothes, now am I? Don't worry, when I was in the air I didn't see anyone else around. It's dark out, it'll be fine."

"You're just going to strip and jump in the lake? Just like that?"

She laughed. "I'm not going up to change into a bathing suit, if that's what you're asking. It's warm enough out and when I was down with my friends only a week ago the water was perfect. It won't have changed that much."

"You've done this before?" she squeaked. "Are you sure you shouldn't be in Gryffindor? That sounds like the bravest thing, I could never, oh my goodness!"

"Just the once, but it was really fun. It was just us girls, it was fine. Though I wouldn't have minded some boys being there either, now that I think about it. There we go." She finished piling her clothes up, put her book on top, but then looked at her wand. "That's going to be the real problem. Humm, I hope I'm close enough to the castle, a ministry agent showing up here would be a bit awkward. Nothing for it though. *Revelio!*" She looked at the cost. "It's in range, I see something under the ground just there." She pointed. *Thank you more powerful magic!* "Probably a cave just on the coast that opens up? *Lumos.*" Her wand lit up and she looked over at Nerida. *Humm, even though she's here she's admitted she can't swim. Better make a return point just in case.* She did. "Let's hope this works. See you in a bit." She turned, ran off the edge of the dock, and did something very, very reckless. She jumped in the water, not having checked the depth or that the way was totally clear. Never do this. Always check before you jump. Always. But as this is a story and ending it right here because she crashed into something and died would be very odd so it was fine. She popped up again. *Okay, let's do this.* She put the wand in her mouth like a knife and started out for the cave which wasn't far. As it was a magical light it wasn't like she had a flashlight shining in her eyes, it only lit up her surroundings, but *Revelio* had worn off by the time she got near. She floated, cast again, and took a deep breath. Diving under she looked around for the cave, finding it and swimming over there. Putting one hand to her chest as her other held her at the edge of the opening she decided she would at least check what it looked like, going part way in. If it was a long tunnel she would back off, come up for air, and come right back here now that she knew exactly where it was. Thankfully it was wide enough she didn't have to wiggle through any tight passage and moved forward. She shouldn't have worried, the tunnel wasn't that long, opening up to an air filled chamber. She climbed out, looking around. *Wait, what keeps the water from rushing in here and filling this whole place? Am I not still below the waterline? That's odd.* There were other odd features of the cave too. For one, a door. *Why is there a door down here? That doesn't even make sense.* She went over and pushed in it. *Locked? What? Am I being tricked? But this place is here...* Looking at the door she didn't see any locks but there was a circular plate in the center with three depressions in it. They looked like butterflies, and as she looked around the area (which was only a few paces across) she found three butterfly looking things flitting about three strange pedestals. One of them was clear, but the other two were completely covered by spider webs of all things.

*So how did spiders get in here?* she wondered to herself. *Low tide? Is this place more accessible at certain times? I don't see any spiders, and there's no cracks in the ceiling they could have come from. Very odd. But what I am supposed to do with these weird butterfly things- OH!* Moving close to look at one and holding the light up to it made it fly towards her wand, now flitting about it rather than the pedestal.

"Do you want to go over by the door?" she asked it. She got no answer, shrugged, and brought it over there. Quickly extinguishing the light and bringing it back showed the butterfly had attached itself to the door. "This is the weirdest lock. What am I even doing here?" She looked down at herself,

dripping wet in this cave, trying to open a door that shouldn't be here to get a gift from the merpeople for a girl she just met. *It's a crazy old life, isn't it? Who made this lock? It's not even a lock, the keys are right there. It's a momentary distraction. Just to make sure a magic user is opening the door? There's no other explanation.* Shaking her head she burned the spider webs away from the two other pedestals and repeated the procedure, putting all three on the door. For a wonder it opened and showed her a pendant of some kind sitting in the next chamber. She looked down at it.

*It's actually here. But how did the merpeople get in here? How did they get the door open? Did they accidentally lock it? This place doesn't look disturbed but clearly someone has been here. I hope this isn't some soft of Aladdin situation, where I've just been tricked into claiming some kind of magical relic because only someone who doesn't know it's a magical relic can get past the door? I mean it doesn't make sense does it?* She carefully touched it, and then picked it up. Shrugging she put it around her neck, took a deep breath, and jumped back into the water. She had no problem getting out of the cave, popping up and looking around. Nerida was waving and jumping around, clearly relieved to see her, so she headed back there. Levering herself up onto the dock with her help, Nerida was grinning widely.

"You made it! Thank goodness. What took so long? I was so worried!"

"It wasn't just sitting there, I had to get a door of all things unlocked. Very strange. Anyway, this is it." She held it up.

"It's beautiful. I'm so glad it was still there. I was worried I'd left it too long and they'd seen it as a slight. You may have just salvaged the first ever trade agreement with the merpeople!"

"Glad to help." *And that you're still here, and my book looks undisturbed.* She started taking it off, after setting her wand down of course. Once it was off Nerida reached for it, but Aerith pulled it back.

"What?" Nerida asked, now looking alarmed.

"Oh don't worry, I'll give it to you. We simply haven't discussed the matter of payment."

"Payment?"

"Of course. You can't get something for nothing, you know. Don't fret, I'm not asking much. Only a token, merely a trifle!"

"What do you want then?"

"You're going to learn to swim. We can have our first lesson now, and the same time every night until it's either too cold or I'm satisfied with your progress. You do want to learn to swim, don't you?"

"Yes but..."

"So, when you can reach that cave I just went into, I'll be satisfied. What do you say?"

"I don't get it. You want a reward for getting the pendant, but that reward is teaching me to swim? What's in it for you?"

*Watching you flail around could be entertaining...* "I actually don't want anything, but it occurs to me if you really are serious about this, better to learn that now before you take it much further. Don't worry, swimming isn't that hard, at least enough so that you won't panic if you happened to be talking to merfolk and fall in. What do you say, I don't have all night you know!"

She glanced around nervously. "I guess?"

"Great! Get down here! You can walk around the edge of the pier, to where it's not too deep. We'll start there."

"Should I take my clothes off too?"

"Unless you want to walk the halls dripping wet, it's what I recommend." She put the pendant and her wand by the book.

"Oh, okay..."

She slowly took her clothes off and walked into the water. Aerith took her hands and led her to where the water was about at chest level, then turned to face her. “Now, the first thing we’ll do is get you used to having your face in the water. Oddly enough even though it’s kinda like bathing, it’s still totally different.”

“It does feel different,” she agreed. “And I’m not just talking about running around outside totally naked. I can’t believe you talked me into this!”

“You’ll forget all about it in a minute, believe me. Now, let’s take a deep breath, and we’ll go under water. I’m right here, so just relax and look at me. Okay? Stay under as long as you can.”

“Okay.”

“Great. On three. One. Two. Three!”

Dear Diary,

The last few days have been pretty crazy. I spent the last two completing the work for Professor Fig, mapping out the area with Revelio. There are close to fifty, yes *fifty* separate camps in the area with a mix of goblins, Ashwinders, and poachers. That means at least five hundred or a thousand people out there following Ranrok. And the ministry is just sitting around and letting this happen? Professor Fig thinks that bribes may be involved. Because of course.

In happier news my lessons with Nerida have been going great. The second night she did show up, and got in the water much faster than the first night. The third night she got me back for scaring her when we first met, but I think only unintentionally. I think I may have created a monster? I didn't see her clothes anywhere so I assumed she wasn't there yet and started taking mine off. Then up she popped from the water! I admonished her not to swim alone but she said she hadn't gone far enough out that she couldn't just stand up. I wasn't sure that was the point but changed the subject and asked had she hidden her clothes or something? She blushed hard enough I could even see it in the darkness and said she hadn't worn any. That's right, the past two nights of not seeing anyone in the halls had emboldened her to simply leave her dorm room and run down here naked! I thought that might be taking things a little too far, but she said it was a total thrill and I should try it some time. She said merpeople don't wear clothes, if she really was going to be liaison to them she could adopt their customs as well. She's apparently trying to transfigure a skirt into a mermaid tail so she can even try swimming like they do? She said she needed a different material, skirt fabric wasn't going to cut it, and I suggested going to see Augustus. No doubt he would be over the moon trying to design a mermaid tail someone can actually wear and use for swimming. So, I guess I broke her? She's become as passionate about swimming and merpeople as Poppy is about beasts, so I can't say it's completely bad. I had to drag her away from the lake that night, she really does love swimming now. Pretty crazy, watching her scamper down the hall without anything on. And she said I was nervy! The Room gave me a pool, I might offer it to her once it gets too cold to be outside.

Speaking of Poppy we're getting along well. My team and I found some books on beasts in the Room which I gave her. She was overjoyed and wanted to know where I got them from. I showed her how to access it, the more the merrier, right? So she's been digging through the place in her spare time as well.

It's now Thursday night, I presented the map to Professor Fig and left the book with him before going to bed, he's going to copy it out so we don't have to show the book to them directly. I don't mind my friends or some of my professors knowing about my (eventual) abilities with magic, but trying to convince a bunch of bureaucrats my map was generated by the possible unconscious interaction of intuitive magic, Revelio, and whatever charms the professors put on the book wouldn't be easy. Much safer just to say he's been compiling this map for several weeks, sneaking close to the camps and marking their locations the old fashioned way. With that project done I went looking for those wellsprings of magic Percival spoke of. My magic can find them, thankfully, so it isn't just me wandering around randomly hoping to run into some. This I approached very carefully. As I've never

really used intuitive magic before consciously, and these wells were supposed to strengthen my connection to it, I approached them with a critical mind. I stood before the first, and subsequent ones for that matter, in contemplation. Then I carefully activated them, trying to feel any difference in myself before and after. *That*, and that alone, would be my connection to this magic. And for a wonder, I am starting to feel something growing in me. A power I think I can tap into! I'll seek out more tomorrow, and then start with something small for practice over the weekend.

The curious thing is, these wellsprings seem determined to be as annoying as possible. When activated they split into several parts, such that I must seek out the parts and activate them separately. As many of these sites are located at crumbling ruins (and as an aside, why are there so many ruins in the area? This should be a prosperous and thriving metropolis, being so close to the only magical school in the whole country. I mean I understand secrecy, yadda yadda, but the fact so many sites (of historical value?) are being allowed to crumble away to nothing seems disrespectful.) the split often means one part of the magic is up on a high platform or stuck beneath a crumbled wall. I am very cautious getting near things like that, I don't fancy being crushed to death thank you very much Sir Magic Pants.

A thought has occurred to me. Perhaps the magic is protecting me? Perhaps to drain the entire well at once would overload my magical "bladder" for lack of a better word. But splitting it up allows me to retrieve it safely. But in that case, "who" is doing the splitting? Very strange. Can the magic itself somehow know it would hurt me, and splits itself to protect me? But that opens a whole new can of worms, if magic can be *thoughtful* it must have *thoughts*, a terrifying prospect to say the least. Could I learn to talk to it? And if I did, *what would it have to say???*

But back to the annoyance. Had these platforms and crumbling walls not been there, would the magic simply be on the ground? It's never very far from the original site, so I must believe there is some distance limitation to all this. Why make me ride my broom, scramble up walls, or duck beneath old wooden beams to get at the magical energies? It does slow me down, perhaps that's the point. Giving me precious seconds of "digestion" time once I take in the power. Sadly, no books have yet emerged dealing with the subject. Perhaps I should start my own, for future users of this type of magic so they don't have to grope along blindly in the dark? As if I needed more work to do...

Friday, and finally another weekend to look forward to. Deek says he has a surprise for me, I've just been too busy with cataloging books and such ("such" being homework, oh my goodness so much homework!) but I promised him I would give him my undivided attention Friday night. He says it's best to start about an hour before sunset, so what he has in mind I can't imagine!

## Chapter 26

Misunderstanding

When: Friday evening

Where: The Room

Aerith looked around the section of Room that was “hers” with some measure of pride. Her friends were there, all of them curious as to what Deek had in mind for them. They had been as excited as she had about exploring both the limits of the “storage area” and her section, and it showed. With Professor Weasley as good as her word and providing her the magical blueprint for a device that seemingly created moonstone out of thin air chugging along, the room was now equal parts decorated and functional. (The Room would “allow” her to set up three of them, any more than that and the spell would simply fail. Why this was drove her mad but she was content with 30 moonstone for free every so often so didn’t try to push it.) She had various potion tables set up with potions bubbling away, large, medium, and small pots full of growing plants, a strange “hopping pot” that somehow could conjure a potion seemingly at random throughout the day, and more. Chopping tables magically worked themselves, again pulling ingredients out of nowhere and preparing them, and a compost machine turned anything left over into fertilizer.

*If only I could sell the output of things here, my money problems would be gone. Granted there isn’t anything I want to buy right at the moment but more money, more good. This place is a fantastic resource and I can’t believe its main purpose is just as a dumping ground. I mean look at all this!*

In addition to the cartloads of books the group had delivered to the library, (mostly the duplicates) she now had her own, shelves and shelves of books that had been moved into her section. Ranging in topics and so far not wanting to move on their own she figured they were not full of dark magic but had not had the time to more than skim the titles and try to put them in some semblance of order. She had found one about rituals, but it seemed more geared towards harm than good, and she had snapped it shut and taken it to Professor Weasley at once. At a glance she had thanked Aerith and said she would place it into the restricted section herself, and left to do just that. It seemed not all ritual magic was good, evil people could use it to further their own ends just as easily as good people. She washed her hands for a few minutes after that.

“We’re all here, Deek, don’t keep us in suspense!” she prompted. Deek had been nervously looking about, clutching a strange looking bag that looked like a doctor’s case.

“Very well, Miss,” he agreed. “Deek found this bag among the items in the Room, and Deek knows what it is. Deek however was somewhat hesitant to give it to Miss. However, Miss has proven herself and her friends as hardworking and loyal, and should be given the option to utilize it.”

“I think I know what it is too,” Poppy told them, a disgusted look on her face. “And what it’s used for.”

“Miss has seen one before?” Deek asked. Everyone looked over at her, and she seemed to wilt a little.

“Oh, I mean, just in books, I mean I read about something that looks like... Go on Deek, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Very well Miss.”

*Odd. Why did she react like that?*

“This is what Deek calls the nab-sack. It can be used in this way.” He demonstrated, opening the case and allowing a powerful vortex, the likes of which would make Kirby proud, to be felt. He snapped it closed again.

“More like a billowing-bag,” Elle remarked.

“You mean sucking-suitcase,” Sabrina countered. “Billowing would be air coming out.”

“No, it’s a hungry-purse,” Jo tried. Several girls shook their heads. “You’re right, sucking-suitcase was better. All in favor?”

“Aye,” several hands went up.

“Motion passes, sucking-suitcase was the better name. I accept my defeat and want to thank everyone for-”

“If Deek may be allowed to continue?” he asked.

“Of course Deek, sorry,” she allowed. The others giggled, but quieted.

“It is primarily used to capture beasts,” Deek went on. “And as Miss has plenty of space in the room, Deek thought Miss may want to have the means to bring them here for study or healing if Miss comes across any that are hurt. If Miss would like, Deek can show Miss the location of several varieties of beast so Miss can practice with the nab-sack.”

“So late?” Aerith asked.

“One type of beast can only be found at night,” Deek explained.

“Ah! So they get sucked in to the sack, but what happens to them then? Are they okay in there?”

“They come out seemingly no worse for wear,” Poppy told her. “At least that’s what I’ve read,” she hastened to remind them. “Like they just go to sleep and come out thinking no time has passed. They can be left in there for weeks, they don’t starve or anything.”

“Miss is correct,” Deek told them. “Miss is very well informed as to the nab-sack.”

“Thank you. I think.”

Aerith crossed her arms and tapped a finger. “I do have lots of space,” she reasoned. “And there are poachers in the area, that much is clear. They would be safer here.”

“I have a spellcraft for a feeding station, if you wanted to set one up,” Poppy told her. “I can give it to you, if you want.”

“That would be a big help. We could put a door over the section leading to the field so they don’t get out...”

“Still don’t know how you managed to fit a whole field in here,” Tina muttered. “That place freaks me out.”

“Let’s go see what it’s all about,” Aerith decided. “Even if I did decide I wanted to only take in hurt beasts, I should know how it works. Let’s see, should I bring someone with me?”

Poppy’s hand went up.

“Someone that likes beasts, that’s who I should bring. Does one of my friends fit that description?”

“Oh, oh, teacher!” Poppy cried. Her hand was now waving back and forth.

“Maybe... Mary?”

“Just say she can come before she explodes,” Mary told her.

“No other way to take that!” Sabrina announced with a laugh.

“I don’t get it,” Elle told her.

“I’ll explain later. Go on you two, get out of here.”

And so both girls and Deek were heading outside the castle. “Our first stop is not far,” he explained. “We will start with something easy, puffskeins.”

“Right.”

They were surprisingly close to the castle and true to his word, simply getting close to a puffskein and opening the nab-sack allowed it to be sucked in. “Hang on,” she said, unhooking her

book. Turning to a previously unused section she noticed there was now a picture of a puffskein on the page, representing her first capture. “Now how about that?”

“How did you make it do that?” Poppy asked.

“I keep asking myself that, actually. Now, do I let it out or bring it to the Room?”

“You can’t just take one,” Poppy told her. “What if some giant sucked up one of your friends one day and walked off with them? You either have to rescue all of them or none of them!”

“It’s a good point,” she admitted. “And there aren’t that many here. I’ll see if I can catch them all.”

So she did. There were six of them, all safely shown in the pages of the book, which told what they were, how old, and if they were male or female.

They then practiced on flying beats, catching four jobberknolls and by that time it was dark so they found a group of mooncalves and took them all in as well. But then the girls had a new problem.

“We’ve got more than a dozen beasts just on this outing,” Aerith announced. “Even with my friends to help, can we care for that many? I need a place for hundreds of beasts, if I’m going to help keep them away from poachers in the area. And will they all get along? I can’t put puffskein eating beasts in with puffskein, now can I?”

“That would never do,” Deek agreed. “Deek knows of another way, however. Madam Peck of Brood and Peck in Hogsmeade will help to find safe homes for them.”

“Homes?” Poppy said, a bit cross.

“Yes. She’s well known for helping to care for beasts in need – and she’ll give you a fair price for them.”

“Price?” Poppy mused, now a bit more cross than before.

“Er, yes, Miss?” Deek answered. The girls looked at each other.

“Perhaps we should pay Madam Peck a visit in the morning,” Aerith announced. “Just to see if she is, in fact, on the level.” *Has Ranrok hired Rookwood to capture beasts and sell them, to fund whatever effort he has going in the area?*

“If you weren’t going to, I was going to,” Poppy told her. “Restriction on leaving the castle or not. I’m glad you think as I do.”

She nodded.

“Thank you Deek. We’ll return to the castle now. Thank you for the nab-sack and the lesson.”

“Of course, Miss. I will see you later.” He snapped his fingers and was gone.

The girls walked back to the castle in silence, Poppy’s usual exuberance and bounce gone. She gave a terse “I’ll meet you at the castle gate after breakfast tomorrow,” and was gone.

*I don’t get it. Did I do the wrong thing? I just want to protect the beasts, but she’s making out like I want to throw them in a stew pot. There’s something more to this, there must be. But if she won’t talk to me about it... What happened to you, Poppy?*

The next day she seemed to have recovered a bit, saying last night she had just been a bit tired and should have given Aerith the benefit of the doubt. She wouldn’t elaborate on exactly what that meant, so both used the Floo network to travel to the village, bag in tow. There they pushed open the door and were greeted with the sight of several beasts hopping around the store, birds in cages behind the counter, and Madam Peck herself. She was a dark skinned woman with short dark hair, and Aerith was taken a little aback. *She must be quite the hard worker to own her own shop as a colored woman. But again, I shouldn’t judge her just based on that. It’s just her skin color, hasn’t Natty been perfectly nice and a hard worker in class? Of course she has. There’s no difference between her and you, so stop thinking that way. Just because your parents-*

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yes, you were recommended to me as possibly being able to find a home for rescued beasts?” She hefted the sack.

“Indeed I can,” she agreed. “Just pop the sack up here and we’ll see what we’re dealing with.”

Aerith did as requested and she got out her wand, seeming to cast a spell on it. “Ah, puffskeins, jobberknolls, and even some mooncalves. Interesting assortment. I’ll give you one thousand, six hundred, and eighty galleons for the lot.”

“What?” Aerith’s eyes nearly popped out, but Poppy was back in scowling mode.

“And you’ll buy any beast, from any person?” she asked hotly.

“If you’re thinking of Rookwood’s poachers, no,” she answered. “They came around here weeks ago, and I gave them a piece of my mind. Told them I didn’t do business with their sort. These beasts haven’t been mistreated, I can find homes for them easily enough. What am I going to do with a puffskein with no fur, or a half starved kneazle? That’s what Rookwood would sell me.”

“You can tell that?” Aerith wondered. *While thinking and your shop hasn’t been burned to the ground? Gutsy lady. With their numbers they could easily do it. They must have found another buyer...*

“The spell I used shows me the general health and well being of the beasts I cast it on. As there are many in the bag here, it’s a simple matter. So, what is it going to be?”

“You promise they’ll go to good homes?” Aerith asked.

“What?” Poppy managed. “Even a good home... They’ll just be put in cages. Cages, Aerith!”

“You can’t know that.” *But I mean they are beasts...*

“Oh do what you like!” She turned and left, slamming the door behind her.

Aerith stood there, shocked.

“I take it that’s a no, then?” asked Madam Peck.

“It’s a lot of money,” she admitted. “But I think if I did it, I would lose her as a friend, forever.”

“Yup.” She nodded and pushed the bag back in her direction. “You better go after her.”

“Thanks. For not giving in to Rookwood.” *Even she knows this guy. The ministry can’t be this inept by accident. Something more is going on here!* She rushed after Poppy, but saw her leaning against the side of the building, wiping her eyes. She went over and joined her.

“Well?” she finally asked, sniffing.

“I was never going to sell them, you know,” she explained. “I was just imagining that huge pile of- Uff.” She was cut off as the smaller girl was hugging her, squeezing the air out of her.

“Oh Aerith, I shouldn’t have doubted you! I’m sorry! Your eyes lit up so much I thought you were just going to be another poacher. I’m sorry. I’m sorry! Please forgive me.”

“It’s okay, Poppy,” she said softly, putting her arms around the girl. “You don’t know me that well, but it’s okay. We’ll do the right thing, honest.” *Whatever that right thing is, I have no idea.*

“What must you think of me? Flying off the handle like that, honestly, how you can you even stand to be near me, the way I treated you just now?”

“Maybe that kind of passion is refreshing. *Maybe* I was testing you just as much as her, to see if you would go along with it. But I got to see a little of the real you today, Poppy. And I’m not mad about it.”

“Really?” She looked up in surprise.

She beeped her nose. “Really. Now, let’s put the sack away, get some tea or something, and talk about what we’re going to do with all these beasts.”

“I- okay.”

“Look, you don’t have to tell me today,” she told the girl, taking her shoulders. “But when you’re ready, I’m here for you. Something must have happened in your past, something big. You’re not alone anymore, Poppy Sweeting. We can face whatever it was, together.”

She nodded.

“Now, where can a girl get a decent cup of tea in this village?”

The problem, the girls discussed, was one of scale. Rescuing only *some* beasts was better than nothing, but felt like leaving the job half done. On the other hand, emptying the forest of beasts was a

bigger job than one young girl with one nab-sack could hope to accomplish before winter. Poppy didn't mind looking after a handful of beasts in the Room, as long as they got plenty of room to run around in, but that still meant either leaving some behind or only taking a few types in the room. Their tea gone, Aerith fell into silence wondering about a possible solution.

"What are you thinking?" Poppy finally asked.

"I'm thinking it's time to see what I can *really* do," she answered cryptically. "But I think I'm going to need more power for it. A lot more power. It might be a bit boring for you, so I don't blame you if you say you want to go back to the castle. But you're welcome to come with me if you want. We've got a lot of work to do, and not many hours to do it."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm sticking with you," she promised. "I hardly doubt anything you'll be doing is boring."

"We'll see. Okay then. I have a spare broom in the book, you can use that one. We've got a lot of sites to visit today."

Poppy stuck with her, despite not being able to see the wellsprings of magic. Once she explained what she was doing, and blowing Poppy's mind in the process ("You can make your magic more powerful by absorbing it from the ground? That's not fair!") she could at least help figure out how to safely reach the points Aerith pointed out. They visited twenty sites before the day was up, and headed back to the castle. Aerith felt much more powerful, the magic almost begging to be used, though she still wasn't clear on exactly how to do so. But before she could even start putting her plan into action, she needed to see Professor Fig.

Heading to his office she found him pacing but he did smile at her.

"How did the ministry meeting go?" she asked.

"Poorly," he admitted. "Oh, they loved your map don't get me wrong. But they said they needed to verify my claims and would 'look into it sometime.' Look into it? Bah! Lazy, no good, good for nothing... Oh it's irritating! But what can I do for you girls?"

"Say I created a space," she asked him. "A place out in the open I didn't want anyone but myself to get into. And anyone I let in, of course. I know you can't apparate into Hogwarts, you said that when we first met. Or George did. My question is, can you charm the space in the same way? Or was it intuitive magic that did it?"

"No, there are charms to make sure a place can be secured. The ministry would have a lot more problems if there wasn't. I know them and can use them. Why?"

"Yeah, what exactly are you up to?" Poppy asked, a gleam in her eyes.

"You'll see," Aerith told them smugly. "If it works. It's going to solve a lot of our problems all at once. Both of you meet me at the castle gate tomorrow after breakfast. We've got work to do!"

## Chapter 27

Boundaries

When: Saturday Morning

Where: Outside the castle

“Thanks for agreeing to come with me, even if it might get you in trouble,” Aerith told the assembled group standing at the entrance to the castle. It was essentially the Anne group, minus Anne, who really couldn’t go where they needed to go. Along with several other members of her beasts class, Professor Fig, and Professor Weasley. “Though I do thank you, Professor Weasley, for your restraint and being willing to listen to *why* we are all taking this little field trip today outside the castle.”

“I admit, you’ve intrigued me,” she agreed. “If I like what I see, there will be no punishments for anyone involved.”

“Thank you. Now, you may be wondering what you are actually doing here.” She paused, looking around at the group.

“I know I am, get on with it!” Poppy told her. “You’ve been so mysterious, what gives?”

“That all ends today!” she announced with a huge grin. “We’re going to put a plan in place to deal with the poachers in the area. That’s why I need your help. We’re all heading to the forest and herding as many beasts as we can to a specific area. There, they shall be kept safe. Our very own Professor Fig has agreed to perform the charms to ward the area against intrusion.”

“I don’t think you understand,” he protested. “The charm is placed on a wall, so no one can apparate across it. Just gathering beasts-”

She held up a hand. “That has been accounted for. A little trust, if you please. Now, the main problem as I saw it was where to put the beasts. It needs to be a big enough area they can have some space. Access to lots of fresh water. Have tall trees for birds. Have a place for beasts that like to hide during the day. None of those nasty spiders nearby. And of course it can’t be anywhere near a current poacher camp. As much as I would like to march into such a place and start tearing it, and anyone who happens to be there, to shreds, the ministry would probably frown on such a thing. Thankfully, such a place exists! Take a look.” She got out her book and opened to the map. “Remember that cave we found, professor? It had that nice body of water near it? And the entrance is still blasted down, so we can put beasts that like to hide during the day in there. It’s perfect. Nearest poacher camps are here, and here.” She pointed. “Nearest spider nests here and here. Both too far away to worry about. What do you think?”

“It does meet your needs,” he agreed, rubbing his chin. “But I’m still not sure how you’re going to keep them there, or keep them safe.”

“You’ll find out when we get there.” She laughed, holding up a white cube she had been hiding in her hand. “Is it not said that from the smallest seed, grows the mighty oak?”

“Something like that, I guess? What are you planning?” He looked thoughtful.

“Maybe what you’re thinking. If there are no objections, let’s get going!” She snapped the book closed, secured it, and put her hand over her broom making it snap up into her hand. “Ouch that stings, do they really have to move that fast?” She threw her leg over, choosing to wear trousers today, and the others mounted up as well. “Let’s move out!”

The group flew over to the spot Aerith had marked, then hovered above it in a clump before her. “Stay here, I’ll go get this started. Once the basic structure is in place and we have an area the beasts can’t get out of, the team, that’s you guys, will head that way,” she pointed, “and look for the tree I’ve tied the cloth to. It’s about a hundred meters out.” (Aerith had discovered another property of the book. She could touch a spot on the map and it told her how far away she was from that point) “Spread out in a line, not so far you can’t see who is on either side of you in case someone runs into trouble, and descend. Drive any beasts you see towards this spot. *Do not use magic.* Just shouting or carrying them if they’re friendly enough. Use spells and the ministry will know and come to investigate. We’re not doing anything wrong,” *I don’t think?* “but those of you who are underage do not want to deal with them, believe me. Got that?”

Everyone nodded but many looked confused. “What do you mean by ‘basic structure?’” asked Jo. “What are you planning?”

“Easier to show you than tell you,” she replied. “You’ll know when you need to move. Be ready.” She pushed her broom down and found a good spot on the cliff that would form part of the natural barrier for the new ‘preserve.’ The area really did have everything she needed, it was a good thing she had found it. But this was the moment of truth. She dropped cube on the ground, took her wand out, and closed her eyes. *Okay Aerith, just like last night. You made that ‘seed’ easily enough, and you saw Isidora conjuring those columns out of nothing. And look what Percival did, making all those rooms for the trial. This is going to be easy. Easy. It’s intent and letting the magic flow. Okay intuitive magic, let’s see what we can do together.* She reached into the magic she felt permeating her after visiting so many sites the day before and visualized what she wanted to happen. The cube started to vibrate, then increased in size. Then the left and right side shot out, creating a large, square beam. She raised her wand and it kept going, forming a five sided figure. *It’s working. Keep going!* She swished the wand and from each point more beams shot out, meeting in the center to provide more strength and stability to the whole thing. Another swish, and a copy of the shape shot out of the first, seemingly rotating but leaving the original shape behind. She repeated this again and again, two becoming four, four becoming eight, eight become sixteen. Rotating up and to the sides, the mystically conjured shape grew and grew, starting to form a dome. *It’s going to work. I’m going to build a habitat no poacher can enter. Keep this up!*

She heard Poppy shouting to the others. “I have no idea how she’s doing it, but it looks like it takes her full concentration. Get going! Start driving the beasts towards this area. I see what she’s doing. Look, it’s above the treeline and starting to curve. She’s going to make a huge dome, but open so rain and sunlight can get in where poachers can’t. Move, let’s go!”

*Thanks Poppy! That’s exactly it.* She summoned from nowhere more material, the structure growing rapidly now, taking on the dome shape she envisioned. Pulling it east, she would cover the water, the huge trees in this area, taking it as far as she could and then slamming it down to the ground, completing the dome. She tried to make it grow as slowly as possible, so the others had time to gather the beasts. *I can get more in here myself* she thought to herself. *But this way is the most efficient for now.*

Some time later, she had no idea how long, she put the last cells in place on the far side of the dome. She, the group, and the beasts they had herded into the space were all inside. Finally she relaxed, leaning against a tree and resting her wand arm. *It worked. I did it. All the beasts in here are safe, no need to sell them. Yes, Poppy, they’re in a cage but at least it’s the biggest one I could conceive of. And when the poacher threat is gone, I can remove it just as easily. But for now, that’s all I can do.*

“Okay, you have to tell me how you did that,” Tina demanded. The others were all crowding around her, shaking the structure and finding it to be rock solid.

“Magic,” she replied with a wink.

“The Hell it was!” she retorted. “You were all ‘oh don’t use magic or the ministry will come’ an hour ago and then you go and do this? There’s no magic that could create such a large structure!”

“My magic can,” she replied. “You just watched me do it. Look, the magic I used isn’t the same magic I use for traditional spells. Your leviosa and such. That’s a cast spell, with a wand movement and incantation. That’s what the ministry picks up with the trace. This was just raw magic, shaped according to my will, and released. No, I can’t teach you how to do it. One person a generation, it seems, has access to it as far as I can tell. This generation it’s me. Sorry about that.”

They all grumbled about it, but they, most of them anyway, had been around magic their entire lives. They lived in a castle supposedly created out of nothing so they really had no cause to get bent out of shape by a “small” working such as this. They accepted it, and really what choice did they have?

“Not to be a negative Nancy or anything,” Sabrina cut in. “But how do we get out? With these bars in the middle we can’t exactly squeeze out.”

“Give me a minute, I’m a little tired after all that. Once the charms are in place to prevent apparating into the dome I’ll get us out.” *At least, I hope I will. I haven’t tried that. I made the cube easily enough the night before, but that proves I’m using the magic in the right way. Creating a doorway back to the castle should be quite easy.*

“She is stuck in here with us,” Jo reasoned. “If she can’t get us out, well, we’ll just eat her first.”

There was some laughter and “I call lower left leg!” gags. One boy called for “Brains!”

“I’ll get started on the charms. You sure I’m not trapping us in here?” Professor Fig asked.

“If I have to, I can remove some of the supports on a cell,” she told him. “And we can just walk out. But I have a plan.”

“Okay. Matilda? Your assistance, please?”

“Of course Eleazar.” They started casting, walking the perimeter of the shape.

“Why this shape?” asked Poppy, running a hand along the hexagon.

“I took my inspiration from nature,” Aerith told her. “Bees. They use this shape, so I figured they must be doing something right. It’s not solid, so it shouldn’t catch the wind that much, and it’s pretty sturdy stuff.” *As sturdy as I imagined it to be, anyway.* “All the parts of it should reinforce all the other parts of it. So it shouldn’t go anywhere.”

“What stops a poacher from cutting through with magic though?” one of her classmates asked.

“This.” Aerith got out from her book a metal rod with an eyeball on the top of it. “Courtesy of Professor Hecat. I’ve got a ton of them, so our next task is to place them inside the perimeter. Space them out so you can *just* see the next nearest one.” She dumped a ton of them out of the book. “Most of you take these and go that way,” she pointed. “Poppy, come with me and we’ll go this way, I have plenty more in the book. She had a *lot* of these things for some reason.”

“What do they do?” another girl asked.

“They’re all connected. If someone starts messing with the structure, they’ll sound an alarm she says she’ll hear no matter where she is. Hopefully the material is tough enough to withstand anything they throw at it until someone can arrive to scare them off.” *I know I couldn’t scratch it with my spells, trying to destroy my cube last night. I think it’ll be fine.*

“Clever,” she admitted. “Okay.” She grabbed one, and everyone started picking one up as well from the pile. “Let’s go.”

Finally Professor Fig said he couldn’t apparate out of the structure anymore, so the job was just about done. Aerith gathered herself for one final effort, and took her wand in hand. She envisioned the inside of the locked room Professor Weasley had shown her that morning, and started growing an archway by the side of the rock wall that served as one of the walls for the dome. *I know this works too. I’ve stepped through them. The magic is responding, I’m not doing anything I haven’t seen. I can make this work, it has to work, it will work!* As the arch completed it flickered to life, and the inside of

the room could be seen. "Everybody through," she announced, putting her wand away and breathing a sigh of relief. "That's our ticket home."

They stepped back through, looking around in wonder at stepping through a doorway back to the castle, and Aerith turned to them. "Thank you everyone. We did good today. Oh shoot, those beasts I captured earlier. One second!" She ran back through, getting out the sack and letting the animals out. They scampered away, and she came back. "That's that. So, this answers your earlier question. How do we maintain the space? This gateway, guarded by the castle itself. With this room locked even if a beast wanders through we can shoo them back, and no one can get in unless they come to the castle first. We'll make sure to put plenty of food pellets someplace, just so they don't start eating each other. I *hope* I made it big enough though there is plenty of vegetation and such, and of course bugs and things can easily fly through the dome so anything that eats that sort of thing should be fine. We'll see how it goes, I'm sure I'll have some volunteers to-" Poppy's hand went up and she laughed. "Exactly. To keep an eye on the place. As we didn't bring any giant spiders or any really dangerous beasts into the space, hopefully it won't be subject to the greater "don't go into the forest" restriction. One could argue you're not really leaving the castle at all, as you start from here, end up here, and it's completely enclosed."

"I'll want a teacher or older student to be with anyone that wishes to visit the area at least at first," Professor Weasley decided. "Once we're sure it's safe and being left alone by poachers we can see about easing that restriction. No one is to go alone, obviously. I want that made clear from the start. I'll post some rules by tonight."

"Thank you. It will be interesting to see how the beasts react to their new sanctuary. Perhaps in class we can make excursions to the space and view the beasts in a more natural environment."

"I'll speak to Professor Howin about it. For now, well done. I had no idea when you told me about this other type of magic you could do it would be quite so powerful and versatile. You've really put it to good use, I hope that continues."

"Of course!"

"As you've all probably had enough of the forest for one day I'll lock this room up again. Actually I may recommend leaving the beast's food here, we can put out some hoppers we can fill every morning. That way it won't get wet if it rains before it is eaten. The beasts will no doubt sniff it out. I'll talk with Professor Howin about the best way to handle it. Come back after lunch and we'll see if we want to move any through the... portal... into the forest proper."

"Yes, professor. Thanks again, everyone. I'll see you later."

"I have to admit," Poppy told her after everyone went their separate ways, "I did not see that coming. Making a sanctuary for the beasts? That was pretty inspired."

"Sorry it's still a cage," she told her. "I made it as big as I thought I could. And I'll move any more beasts I find into it with the nab-sack. I just hope there's enough space, I don't know how territorial these little guys are."

"It's great," she gushed. "It's the best solution possible, really. I get it. We have to keep them safe, and that means building a wall to keep poachers out. It's better then selling them to someone that loses interest in the beast they bought after a month. It's the best of both worlds. Thank you. I don't know what doing that kind of magic cost you, but you have a friend for life. If you'll have me, that is."

"You're not getting rid me, don't worry," she told the smaller girl. "Who else am I going to copy off of during my exams?"

"I hope you're joking?"

"Wait I did all that and I still have study too?" she gasped. "That's it I'm tearing it down!"

Her mouth dropped open, but Aerith just laughed. "You're a true gem, you know that Poppy?"

Some time later Aerith headed down to see Percival, dragging Professor Fig with her. She couldn't wait to tell them she had used intuitive magic on purpose at last, and so she was ready to

continue these stupid trial now. *Get them over with, and then I don't have to see his dumb painting anymore.*

“Good news,” she told him when they were both down in the map chamber. “I’ve visited about three dozen wells of magic and absorbed them. And I’ve used intuitive magic for the first time. You’ll never believe what it allowed me to do!”

“Again I must caution you to be careful,” Percival said gravely. “As you don’t really have a teacher or the whole story of what happened with Isidora your use of the intuitive magic should be tempered.”

“Little late for that,” she informed him gaily. “You’ll never guess what I did. Hey, we’ve got a map right here I can describe it. Here’s the forest... Now that’s odd.” Looking down at the map she saw a new feature highlighted on it. A dome, covering a part of the forest. “This reflects the outside in real time? Of course it does. Anyway, can you see it? I made that dome in the forest to keep out poachers. Just like you guys made those chambers, and Isidora made those columns out of nothing. I created a shell that’s acting as a preserve for beasts. I even managed one of your folded space doors, leading from the center of the dome to... What is it?”

Looking back up at the painting, Percival looked furious.

“What have you done?” he roared.

## Chapter 28

Reckless

When: Saturday Afternoon

Where: The map room

“What have I done?” Aerith repeated back to the painting. “Just used my magic to make a positive difference in the local area. I thought you would be pleased.”

“Pleased? You’ve gone out there and revealed your power to the world! Professor Fig, were you part of all this? I can’t believe you didn’t stop her.”

“Uh, excuse me?” Aerith exclaimed. “In the first place he’s not there to ‘stop me’ I’m there to help him find closure for why his wife was killed. You seem to keep forgetting this power is *mine*. Maybe instead of making a fake book with gibberish inside that activated a map, you should have written a real book with real information? Just a thought? If you were so worried about it? In the second place, who was it that stood there on their little perch and waved their wand around to make it rain in the valley? Oh right, you and your buddies. How is what I’ve done any different?”

“It’s different because you’re a child! I had a lifetime to master the magic, and the experience to know when it was proper and when it was not proper to use it!”

“Oh, I see. So it was proper to save a couple of wizard’s homes from drought, which Isidora saw leading to her realizing she could use intuitive magic like I can, leading her to something you won’t tell me but resulted in all this secrecy. By the way, how do wizards even experience drought anyway, aren’t there spells to create water?” She turned to Professor Fig.

“Er, yes, there’s the *aguamenti* spell, that creates water from the wand. Perhaps it wasn’t known at the time?”

“A *water* making spell not known at the time? I find that hard to believe. They needed water, they were wizards. You do the math. Anyway, still waiting for a good reason to be told to me.” She turned back to the painting.

“To reveal you can do what you can do now is foolish in the extreme! You haven’t concluded the trials yet, for one thing!”

“And who’s fault is that? You’ve had plenty of time to tell me where the next one is to be found. But instead you wanted me to strengthen my connection to the magic. I did that. Then I saw a problem that could be solved with it. So I solved it. Would you rather have me just sit and do nothing? Why do I have this power, in that case, if it is not to be used?”

“Using it recklessly can cause great harm. Something you would know if you had waited and completed the trials.”

“Or you could just tell me what happened, saving me the trouble.”

“I may have to. Allowing you to complete the trials and acquire the fail-safe to unlock the final chamber would be a disaster, if this is your attitude. I have half a mind to forbid you magic all-together!”

“You forbid? You? Very well!” She got her wand out and held it up. “Step out of the painting and take my wand from me. Go ahead. I’m waiting. Come right on down here and... No? Can’t do it?” She put it back. “So let’s talk about what you can do, which is tell me the location of the next trial as you’re so hot on that.”

“Professor Fig, would you back me up on this?” Percival asked.

He pondered a moment. “To take her wand away? No, I don’t think so. Not at the current time. Honestly, apart from the door she created from here to there, the structure she created *could* be explained by more mundane, if you will, magic. Small scale transfiguration of metal blocks into the individual shapes that were used to create the dome could be completed by any number of wizards working together. They could have then fused them together on site with sticking charms. No, only the speed at which she constructed the dome would raise any eyebrows. And it’s fairly deep in the forest, you wouldn’t know it was there from the village or the surrounding areas. Oh certainly there may be stories of a strange structure appearing in the forest overnight but there’s plenty of odd tales where magic is involved. No one would get that excited about it. It’s not hurting anything and it was born out of a desire to slow down these poachers that have infested our local area. Now, should she be creating these doorways all over the place? Practicing her magic where people can see it? No, probably not. But I don’t think she’s that reckless.”

“I see. There is still the matter of letting others know about her ability.”

“We’ve been over this,” Aerith told him. “I’m not going to be constantly looking over my shoulder for someone about to control me with magic. No one else can use it, so letting people know I can may result in some jealousy, but it’s not like they can replicate anything I do.”

He rubbed his head. “Very well. For now. I will consult with the others about what next steps you should take. I suppose you don’t need any more practice using it, if you can make something so large on your first try. Just be careful, all right?”

“Of course.”

“But you are going to have to show us some more maturity before we hand over the final piece of the fail-safe and allow you to unlock the final chamber.”

“You know I’m going to be considered an adult in a little more than a year, right?” she asked. “I’m not going to wake up on my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday with a new clarity and maturity. What you see is pretty much what you get at this point. I’m not six.”

“This delay in knowing you can even do magic seems to be at play here,” Professor Fig reasoned. “First year classes are more than just practical lessons. There’s a lot of drumming into people’s heads about how and when to use magic. As you’ve jumped right into fifth year you missed out on a lot of that.”

“So you’re saying I need some kind of magical talking animal to be my conscience?”

“You mean like in that new book, Pinocchio?” Professor Fig asked. “I’m not sure I would go that far.”

“You know that book?”

“I’m surprised you do! Though, wait, Ravenclaw. I take it back.” He chuckled. “Well, maybe not that far. But perhaps we can get her assurance she won’t practice any more magic than simply making simple shapes, and maybe that wondrous door as we already know it can do that, for the time being. And to only do so among those she trusts not to betray her? As it is her connection to intuitive magic we must train, not any specific spell, as it doesn’t work that way. This should keep her out of trouble, don’t you agree?”

“I can agree to that,” she allowed. *If it will make you feel better.*

“Very well. As she does point out I’m not really at liberty to do more, so I will defer to your judgment, Professor Fig. With that out of the way, I do want to at least give you some small congratulations for what you did. It was a terrible risk, even if you don’t think so, but it seems it was an excellent working. I can’t ignore that aspect of it, so well done.”

“Thank you.”

“Come and visit me again in a few days, we should have an answer for you then.”

“Very well, I will see you then.”

Aerith spent the rest of the day doing homework, and then Sunday worked on the Room a bit more, as well as helping Poppy and some other volunteers with monitoring the new sanctuary. Monday and Tuesday passed, with her going to classes as normal, and at dinner Tuesday evening Nerida found Aerith at her table, with another girl in tow.

“Hi Nerida, what’s up?” Aerith asked.

“Hey Aerith, this is Adelaide. She’s been moping about so I asked her what the matter was. I think it’s something you might want to hear.”

“Hi Adelaide, what seems to be the problem?”

“It’s not a problem with me, exactly,” she began. “It’s my uncle, Rowland. I’m afraid something has happened to him.”

“Oh?”

“When he’s away on business he always sends me an owl at least once a week. Usually more though. But after his last one, nothing. I’m getting worried.”

“If there is something out of the ordinary about his behavior it could be something to look into,” Aerith agreed. “Was there anything in the last letter that concerned you? Going somewhere he had never gone, for example?”

“I’m afraid so. He mentioned brokering a deal with goblins, that Ranrok that’s been in the papers lately? He’s dealt with goblins for years, he represents various mines who use him to find clients for their raw material. But if Ranrok really is bad news...”

“He could be,” admitted Aerith. “That name keeps coming up around here. I don’t like it.”

“I figured,” Nerida spoke up, “as you have permission to leave the castle, you might be able to take her with you and go look for him.”

“Would you?” Adelaide asked hopefully. “I hate to impose but I just, all these horrible things keep popping into my head that could have happened to him. I can’t concentrate at all.”

“I have permission to leave to go do certain things,” she clarified. *Relating to intuitive magic.* “But as this does seem to be some kind of emergency, I’m sure no one would mind.”

“Oh thank you so much!”

“Of course. Girls, I’ll be back,” she said to her friends at the table. “If I’m not back by Thursday, you just go ahead and do what needs be done.”

“Yes of course!” said Mary.

She got up and left with Adelaide. As she left she heard the others talking. “Do you know what she meant by that?”

“No clue.”

“She says weird things sometimes...”

Now on brooms and heading towards the last location Rowland had sent her, Adelaide pointed. “I think that’s the place.”

“Let’s land for now, we’ll approach on foot.”

“Right.”

They landed and Aerith stowed their brooms, and they crept closer. “Goblins! What do we do?”

“Do? We ask them if they’ve seen your uncle of course! What else would we do?”

“You mean just walk up to them?”

“Of course. They aren’t going to attack two witches in broad daylight after all.” *Still, a return point right about here could come in handy. And- done. Even if they do follow Ranrok and are looking for something, they aren’t just going to see us and want to murder us. They’ll want to know what we’re doing there.*

“I guess. Okay, I guess we’ll just ask them.”

The two made their way closer, and a goblin standing guard stood up straighter. “What are you kids doing out here?” he asked.

“Hello sir. My name is Adelaide. I’m looking for my uncle, Rowland? His last letter to me said he would be here. He was going to put you in touch with a mine? He’s a metal dealer?”

“Rowland? Don’t think I know anything about that. Hey Riplock!” he shouted, turning.

“Yeah?” said another goblin, jogging over there.

“You know anything about a human named Rowland? Metal guy?”

“That guy left days ago!” he insisted. “I’ve got some trash he left though, you want it? Papers of some kind I think?”

“Oh, if you don’t mind, sir? I don’t want to put you to any trouble. But I would be happy to take his trash off your hands and apologize on his behalf for cluttering up your camp with it.”

*Maybe laying it on a little too thick, Adelaide.*

“Well as you’re being so polite about it, it’s no trouble at all. Wait here.”

“Okay.”

*Or not! He went for it. Nice. I just hope it’s not his used handkerchief or something.*

He went into a tent at the far end of the camp and came back with a small leather bound book. “That’s his I think,” Riplock told them, handing it over.

“Thank you very much,” she told him. “I won’t bother you further.”

“Have a nice evening,” said the goblin.

“You too.”

They walked a bit away from the camp before Adelaide turned to Aerith. “Is this far enough away you think?”

She looked back over her shoulder. “Yeah. What is it?”

“It’s his journal all right. He wouldn’t just leave it. Let me look at the last entry.”

“Right.”

“Humm, says here the goblins want rare metal suitable for drilling.”

“The heck does that mean?”

“He was translating from Gobbledegook, maybe something was lost in the translation? I mean if the metal was taken out of the mine you wouldn’t need to drill it. Maybe he meant for making drills?”

“But does it mention him going anywhere?”

“No, but this does, look.” She showed Aerith a page with a hand drawn map on it, showing a line following the river.

“Then I guess we follow the river and look for that broken tower. It should be right to the south of it, right?”

“Yes, across the river. Let’s go.”

They headed downriver and found the tower, it not being very far on brooms. Then they turned south and headed towards a run down building the goblins seem to have taken over. They watched as a goblin walked through the front entrance, looked around casually, and leaned against the wall.

“What do you think?” Adelaide whispered to Aerith. “Same strategy? It did work before, surprisingly.”

*Not without a fresh return point. And done!* “I really don’t want to try sneaking through this place. He could be anywhere, if he’s still here. Let’s see what they have to say.”

“Right.”

The two made their presence known, the goblin grabbing his ax from his back as they approached, but relaxed again when he saw it was two kids.

“Oy, what are you two doing poking around here?” he demanded.

“Good evening, sir. My name is Adelaide, I’ve been led to believe my uncle is here? A man named Rowland? Do you know him?”

“Rowland you say? Humm, I might. You’re his niece then?”

“Yes sir. He deals in metals?”

The goblin got a very calculating look his face. “Of course! Rowland! Silly of me, he’s the only human around here. Yes indeed, you are in luck my dear. We’re just about to wrap up our negotiation for the metal he promised us I think. Yes, indeed. I just came up for a bit of air, you understand. We were down in the lower levels, but never mind that. I can take you right to him, yes I can. You can see him for yourself, maybe even join us for a cup of tea when he’s done.”

“So he’s here? He’s all right?”

“Course he is! What do you take us for?”

“Oh thank you so much! I didn’t mean anything, it’s just he’s not sent me an owl in so long, I was worried.”

“We’ve been in pretty deep negotiations,” he agreed. “Come on, this way, I’ll take you right to him.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Of course. And who is your friend?”

“This is Aerith. Technically speaking I’m not supposed to be out of the castle but she’s been given special permissions. So she’s just along to make sure I stay safe.”

“Ah, nothing to harm you around here. I mean, unless you trip over a brick or something. This place has seen better days let me tell you. Just watch your step.”

“Oh yes, thank you, I see what you mean.”

The goblin led them through the place, passing several more goblins in armor and with weapons. They all looked at the two humans quizzically, but then seemed to come to a conclusion and smile.

“Everyone seems very friendly here,” Adelaide remarked.

“Oh goblins are a pretty friendly bunch, if you don’t treat us poorly. Now, just down here my dears.”

He pointed to a staircase leading down, they all had to step over a metal door that looked like it had been ripped off the hinges and just thrown down in the dirt to rot.

“You don’t mind if I light up my wand, do you?” Aerith asked. “It looks pretty dark. Don’t goblins have much better night vision than humans?”

“Ah, didn’t think of that. Of course, of course, don’t want you breaking your neck on the stairs now do we?”

“Thank you.” She got her wand out and lit it up, and Adelaide did the same. *Having it closer to hand seems prudent.*

Her immediate sight down the stairs was of wooden boxes, a whole stack of them off to the right, and they did have some fires and candles going down here.

“Right to the right now,” their guide said, taking the lead. “Not far now.”

They passed racks of weapons and a bunch of shields that looked far too big for goblins to even use. *They could crouch down and be completely hidden behind those things.*

“That is some strange artwork,” Adelaide remarked, pointing as they moved through the place. Above them, on the walls of the second floor walkway were a strange furry creature that stood on two legs and had wings, a sad looking bird, a snake, and a dragon. “I mean, unless your people did them, but they seem to be too high. I doubt you do artwork on ladders.”

“Mostly smiths here,” the guide admitted. “Some engineers.”

“Odd taste, whoever owned this place originally.”

They passed several more goblins heading up some stairs, again all in armor, and Aerith was glad they hadn’t tried sneaking past. She maybe could have, but these were not goblins to take lightly. They were fighters, that much was clear.

“Just around the next bend,” he announced. “Then the happy reunion.”

"I'll be ever so relieved to see him again!"

"As I'm sure he will be."

There were four more goblins in the room they came to, and their guide walked up to a heavy metal door. "Hey Rowland, your niece is here!"

"Adelaide?" cried a voice from inside. "Have they captured you too?"

"Captured?" she cried, horrified, looking at the door. It was heavy, metal, with a slot in the center to push food through. "What have you done to him? Let my uncle out this instant!"

"No can do, girl," said the goblin, now truly reaching for his weapon. "You walked right in here without any fuss, and now we can use you against him. If you want to see your niece alive, you'll give us what you promised us, human!"

*Oh, human is it? So this was all just an act. I should have-*

"Grab them!" the goblin ordered.

Aerith's danger sense went off, and she shielded, bouncing back a goblin that had lunged for her. She spun, aligning herself with their so called guide. "Depulso!" He went flying into his friend, making both of them go down in a tangle of limbs.

"I'll try to hold them back," Adelaide shouted. "Get that door open and get him out of there. Stupify!"

*Crap, I can't tell if she's going to get attacked. I hope you get good grades in defense class. Get the door open she says, how in the world am I going to do that? She had been looking the door over, wondering if she should simply blast it down, but no, that could throw it inside the cell and hurt Rowland. Have to yank it out this way. But is my magic strong enough? Wait, when I learned the confringo spell didn't the girls tell me cold makes things brittle? To be careful casting it on things I didn't want broken? I want something broken now, the stone around the door. That's the weak point.* "Confringo!" she cast, several times. Ice started to form around the door as she pointed her wand. She risked a glance, the two had gotten up and Adelaide was switching between the other targets, throwing the minor blasting curse at them and forcing them to advance slowly. *Good thing they don't have shields. Hold them off one more second Adelaide.* "Accio!" Aerith reached into her magic, envisioning the door coming free, and the stone started to crack. *Come on!* With a tearing sound it came loose, and she whipped it behind her. This caught another goblin that had come to see what the fuss was about, slamming him backwards and crushing him beneath the heavy door.

*Sorry!*

A disheveled looking man in a suit stepped out, looking around. Somehow he had the presence of mind to put his top hat back on, but he looked like he hadn't eaten or shaved for days. "My word!"

Then it got worse. Ministry agents, three of them, popped into existence, at least one of them seeing Aerith standing there.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"More of you? This guy must be more valuable than we first thought to mount this kind of rescue," said a goblin, throwing himself at the agents. He was forced back, wand flashing, as the ax the goblin was wielding flashed close.

"Get help!" he cried. "Goblins attacking wizards? Impossible!"

"Right," said one of the men, vanishing again.

"Come on, we need to go," Aerith told Adelaide, grabbing her hand.

"Uncle, come with us!" she screamed.

"I don't have my wand, I can't leave without it!"

"The ministry is here, he'll be fine," Aerith promised. "Come on, we can't be here when the dust clears."

"Here!" She tossed him her wand and let herself be pulled along. "Come to Hogwarts when you can so I know you're safe!"

"Right!" He blew a goblin off their feet.

Aerith put the disillusionment charm on them both and they crept their way back, goblins running past them in their haste to join the fight.

*What did we do? This is bad, really bad!*

## Chapter 29

Repeat

When: Wednesday morning

Where: Dorms

Aerith awoke the next morning to a pounding on her door, and someone shouting to open up. She wasn't wearing much, having basically returned to the castle the previous night and dropped into bed. *I hope Rowland made it out of there in one piece. Is this Adelaide to come and tell me he didn't? Wait that sounds like a man's voice.* She grabbed her robe and threw it on as the others got up, Jo going to open the door.

"Took you long enough," said a voice from below them.

"Goblin?" Jo announced, jumping back.

"What?" everyone was wide awake now. He strode into the room, followed by the headmaster, and another man Aerith didn't know.

"Yeah, that's the girl," said the goblin pointing to Aerith. "She's the one what killed him. Arrest her."

"Arrest?" Aerith gasped.

"The charge is murder," the unknown man told her. "Who is this?" he asked the headmaster.

"I don't know everyone's names around here," he protested. "How can a student even be charged with murder anyway?"

"Name?" he asked her, disgusted.

"Aerith Gainsborough," she answered.

"Very well. Miss Gainsborough, did you or did not not, around 5:30 PM Tuesday evening assault a goblin encampment resulting in the death of one of the workers there?"

"Workers?"

"Yes, he was crushed by a door and died instantly, according to the charges. Ministry personnel were also at the scene and verified the claim, and described a young girl fitting your description fleeing the scene after they arrived."

"She did what?" the headmaster asked. "She really killed a goblin? With a door?"

The man sighed. "According to reports she was being escorted through the compound to meet with another individual who was there to negotiate a trade agreement between the Argonaut Mining Corporation and the goblins. Once reunited with one Rowland she attacked the goblins, killing one of them. This triggered the trace, allowing ministry personnel to apparate to the location to see what was going on. This caused the goblins to believe they were under attack, allowing this girl to sneak away in the confusion. Thankfully no one else was seriously injured as both sides soon realized it was all a big misunderstanding and went their separate ways. We tracked the girl to Hogwarts and here we are. Are these facts more or less correct, Miss Gainsborough? I must advise you that you are under arrest either way and a trial will be conducted to determine the facts of the case. But if you have anything to say in your defense, I am prepared to take a statement." He got out a pad and a pencil, looking at her expectantly.

"In the first place, Rowland was a prisoner in the camp. I was there to try and rescue him."

“A bold lie,” the goblin sneered. “Why would we imprison the man? If we didn’t get our metal from him, another human would be along to sell us the same thing. We’re not so short sighted to detain a possible business partner over a single deal.”

“Is it possible you simply *believed* the man was unable to leave?” asked the agent. “And how did you learn of this possible imprisonment in the first place?”

*If they didn’t see Adelaide or are ignoring her I’m not going to bring her up. Still, how do I tell him how I did I learn about it without bringing up her name?* “A classmate came to me with her concerns. Have you spoken to Rowland, he’ll tell you how he was being treated!”

“I’m the one asking the questions now,” he told her. “The name of the student?”

“You know what? Forget this. We’ll just rescue him another way.”

“I’m sorry?” The man looked at her quizzically. *No sense making a return point to a terrible timeline. Bye fellows.* She dramatically snapped her fingers and triggered a return.

Aerith and Adelaide were crouching behind a low wall, watching the goblin leaning against the entrance to the place.

“Well, time for a new plan,” she announced. *And it’s Tuesday night again. Wonderful.*

“What? I didn’t know we had an old one.”

“We did, and it didn’t work out that well.”

“Didn’t... work out? What are you talking about?”

“What? Never mind that! Give me a minute to think.”

“Sure?”

*Okay, so he’s in the cell, and he needs his wand. We can’t start anything or the trace goes off. Nor can I kill anyone, not that I want to of course, I was afraid I killed that goblin I accidentally hit with the door and it seems I did. But now he’s alive again, a miracle! I kill anyone and the goblins just have me arrested for murder. We still have good relations with them, their government won’t stand for witches murdering them. And as there’s no way to prove these goblins are with Ranrok or even that what Ranrok is doing is against wizard kind, I’ll be guilty! There’s at least a dozen goblins between us and him, but at least I know how it’s going to play out. She’ll be used against him, something about metal I really wasn’t paying that much attention last time. Could I sneak ahead while she walks, find his wand, pass it to him... And then what? I would still have to fight my way out. That’s no good. I mean I could stun them or paralyze them but the ministry will still find out about- hang on! Now there’s an idea. Get them to work for me instead of against me. I think I saw some empty cells in the room they were keeping Rowland. Or I can find another place nearby. Yes, that could work!*

“Okay, here’s the plan,” she told Adelaide. “You’re going to walk up there, bold as you please, and ask about your uncle. He’s here, and he’s unhurt.” *Even his hat is unhurt, which is quite odd. Did he really keep that thing on while being imprisoned for several days? What a guy.* “I’m going to be right by your side, invisible.” *I can’t tell her the condition he’s in, her reaction has to be genuine.* “If something goes wrong, I can strike from hiding.” *No I can’t. It’s a lie, that would just get me back to the bad timeline. But she needs to think I’ve got her back so she’s willing to walk in there.* “Can you do that? I’ll be right at your side the whole time, but you can’t let them know that. You have to pretend you got here on your own.”

“I can do that, I guess.”

“No, you can. I know you can. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Then why all the sneaking around on your part?”

“Have you ever heard of insurance?”

“I guess so.”

“That’s what I’m here for. If he’s fine, it’s fine. You collect him and we leave. But wouldn’t you feel better if something were to go wrong, I was there to make a surprise appearance?”

“Your magic is pretty strong. Okay, here we go I guess.”

“Here we go.” She hid herself and walked beside Adelaide carefully. *That one spell will get them interested and looking at the area, my spells later will draw them like flies to horse poop- wait am I the horse poop in this analogy?* It was very run down here, and tripping over something and losing her spell was not what she had in mind. Things played out about the same, the goblin clearly getting the idea to use her as a hostage and leading her down to the lower level. *Now that I know what his plan is, it’s obvious. Look how gleeful he looks that we just walked down there. Stupid. But hey, we didn’t know. Okay, here’s the stairs, careful now. So far so good.*

Adelaide rushed to her uncle’s cell, calling for his release and making the goblins chuckle. Aerith made a beeline for the cell to the right, dodging past the goblin that was heading towards Adelaide and slipping behind the wall. There she put her hand over her wand and cast lumos as quickly and quietly as she could. Adelaide was calling for help, clearly grabbed, and Rowland was shouting to not hurt her, he would do whatever they wanted. *Sorry, Adelaide, I know you’re feeling really scared right now because you think I’ve abandoned you, but I haven’t. If events play out the same as before right about... Now?*

Three ministry people appeared out of nowhere, surprised looks on their faces to see goblins grabbing a witch and a man’s voice behind a cell door. “Hey now, what’s all this?” they demanded. “Is that the girl doing underage magic? What are you doing to her? Unhand her at once, goblin!”

“She... She was attacking us!” one of the goblins tried to convince them.

“With a lumos spell?” said one. “Not likely.”

“Hey, there’s a man in this cell!” one of the agents announced. He had bent down to look through the food slot, meeting Rowland’s eyes in the process. “Get him out of there at once!”

“That was for his own protection!” insisted another goblin. “He was going to renege on a deal and some goblins didn’t like that. We put him in there to keep him safe. I, of course, was against it and just said we should let him leave but...”

“I don’t care why he’s in there. Let him out, now!” demanded the man, pointing his wand at the goblin.

“All right, all right,” he agreed, raising his hands. “No need to be like that. It’ll just take a second.”

Meanwhile, Aerith had put her invisibility spell back on and had tugged Adelaide’s sleeve. “I’ll wait for you down past the gate,” she whispered. “They should be able to handle it now.”

She gave a quick nod of her head and Aerith started off. She headed past several goblins that had heard the commotion and were going to see what was up. *I hope the threat of a greater ministry response keeps these goblins on their best behavior. They’re pretty well outnumbered.*

She made it back and a tense twenty or so minutes later Adelaide and her uncle emerged from the ruins. They walked past her, looking around. Aerith, still invisible, tapped her on the shoulder, making her spin. “Boo,” she cried, breaking the spell in front of Adelaide.

“Yaaaaa!” she cried, jumping back. “Oh my God Aerith, don’t do that!” She put her hand on her chest. “My heart nearly exploded!”

Aerith just laughed. “So everything is okay then? Rowland, good to see you in one piece, glad your hat made it out without any trouble.”

“My hat?”

“Yeah that’s a nice hat. Everything is fine, right?”

“I’m not pressing charges, and they let us go. Those ministry people were acting fairly strange through,” he admitted. “Like they didn’t want to rile up the goblins despite them imprisoning a wizard. Can you even imagine it? The nerve? But the ministry seems more on their side than mine. It’s criminal, I tell you. Have we met, by the way?”

"I'm Aerith, nice to meet you. Sorry about that, Adelaide. I couldn't tell you the whole story or directly interfere. I needed the ministry to be there, it would have gotten ugly otherwise. You may have thought I was abandoning you, but I was not! It was all part of the plan."

"How in the world did you know?"

"I... used my magic," she replied honestly. "How else?"

"There's no magic like that!"

"However it happened," Rowland interrupted, "you have my thanks. Aerith, was it? I can't repay what you've done for me. I really thought I was a goner."

"You can try," she told him. "Why were those goblins so adamant about getting your metal? There must be easier ways to get it, if you balked and said the deal was off."

"The thing is, the metal these goblins want is quite rare and specialized. They wanted enormous quantities of it, and something about drills. But I can't imagine the size of the drill they must be building to need so much metal. It's beyond belief."

"Drills, you say. I see." *To find something a certain someone hid underground several hundred years ago? Could be, could be.* "Look, would you mind coming back with us? I want to get you in touch with Professor Fig. He knows someone at the ministry, George something, I don't know his last name, who has been trying to get them to take these goblins running around more seriously. Would you be willing to tell him your story? Even if you don't want to press charges, and at this point that's probably wise, I think he would be greatly interested."

"I don't mind, give me a chance to catch up with my niece. And maybe stop at the village for a bite, I'm famished. Don't really treat prisoners very well, goblins."

"Thank you." *We're going to get to the bottom of this, even if that stupid painting won't tell us what we need to know already. It's all connected. It's got to be.*

"Anyway, it worked, so thanks Aerith. You're the best. I see what Nerida sees in you. She went on and on about you, I thought she had a major crush on you or something. But she was actually just telling it like it is. You came up with a plan, used the ministry to get what you wanted, and got away without anyone even knowing you were there. That's pretty amazing."

"Oh, come on now!" *Yes, after screwing it up so badly the first time. Thank you, returning magic!* "Wait, do you really think she has a crush on me?"

"Nah, she's too obsessed with merpeople to have crushes on mere humans."

"I have gotten that impression myself."

"And isn't the rumor you've been hanging around Poppy a lot lately? What's the story there?"

"No story! Come on, let's get going can't hang around this stupid ruin all night! Here's your broom, can you ride two to a broom if you stay low?"

So Roland met with Professor Fig at the castle, and was put in touch with George. Feeling she wouldn't be charged with murder the next day she went to bed relieved instead of horrified about killing that goblin, who had survived this time and, like George, would never know his awful fate in the bad timeline. She was instead woken up by her alarm as usual, took her usual slotted time at the sink in the bathroom, and went to class. Before defense class started she pointed at Sebastian and crooked a finger, calling him over.

"Hey Aerith, how are you?"

"Not bad, thanks. Hey, I know I'm still probably not high on your 'people I want to do favors for' list but can you do me a favor?"

"Maybe, what's this about?"

"Anne. I want to learn more about the attack. Can you show me where it happened? Maybe after class today?"

"Are you suggesting we break the rules?"

“Not at all! I have a pass to leave the castle with one other person. Today that person is going to be you. I need answers, and maybe this attack is the place to start.”

“How did you manage that?”

“Never mind, can you help me or not?”

“I’ve wanted to check the area myself, see if there are any clues around as to who exactly cursed my sister. Knowing what they were doing there could also help. I don’t have a wand though, thanks to you. If something happens, there’s not much I can do about it.”

“Thanks to your own bad choices, you mean? Never mind, stop by Professor Fig’s office after class and we’ll see what we can do about that.”

He started to ask why, but Professor Hecat started class at that point.

Later that afternoon Aerith knocked on Professor Fig’s door with Sebastian in tow. “Professor Fig? Are you here?” She stuck her head in the room and looked around. “Shoot, not here.” She went in, looking around.

“Should we come back?” he asked.

“I want to get going before it gets dark. I’m sure he’ll understand. I just hope it’s still here.” She crossed the room and opened the desk drawer she had seen him put her old wand into. “Ah, it is. Let’s see...” She got some parchment and wrote “I.O.U. One Wand” and put it in the desk after signing her name. She held the wand in two hands.

“Hello old friend. I need you to help someone else for a bit, can you do that? His name is Sebastian, he’s helping me out. Be nice.” She offered it to him but drew it back a little as he reached for it. “Obviously this is just a loan, I need it back when we return. And don’t do anything stupid with it, I can still have you on the floor in seconds we don’t need another example of how you’re incapable of beating me.”

“Don’t remind me. I know it’s just a loan, don’t worry. I’m not stupid you know.”

*Evidence suggests otherwise...* “Fine.” She allowed him to take it, closed the drawer, and they two headed out of the castle. They went to Sebastian’s home in Feldcroft, and kept walking past the town.

“A lot of the debris you’ll see on the way is because of that night,” he explained as they walked. “Our destination is right over there.” He pointed to a house on a hill in the distance. Aerith could barely see a rotting wooden roof, and started following Sebastian down a dirt trail going in that direction. When they were about halfway there they started hearing voices, and both darted behind some rocks sitting by the side of the road.

“Goblins?” Aerith whispered. “They’re still active in the area?”

“So it seems. We’ll have to go around if we can. Blast!”

“But Anne was cursed! You brought her to the healers, didn’t they ask what happened? Did the ministry do nothing to chase these goblins off?”

“Didn’t send a soul to look into it. Why do you think I’ve been so single minded in trying to help her myself?”

“What in the world?” *Corruption. It has to be. Someone at the top is getting paid to look the other way. There’s no other explanation. Anne could have died, someone needs to be arrested for what they did to her. And they do nothing? But a student uses a couple of light spells and they’re all over it. Can they get any more despicable? They were right there arresting me when one of their own was killed but they’re the ones causing trouble and nothing is said. It’s not right.*

“Let’s see how this wand reacts. Stay low and try to follow me.” He vanished, and Aerith did too. They crept around the site, getting close enough to see that the goblins were digging. She didn’t see anything she would call a “drill” but there were large holes in the ground here. *Curious. Thankfully they seem to have moved down here, leaving the house clear. There’s carts and shovels everywhere, and*

*there's a hole with a rope leading down into it, so they've done quite a lot of digging around here it seems. What could a goblin possibly want from Isidora's time though?*

"Here's the estate," Sebastian told her. "You can see the fire damage."

"It still smells of smoke."

"Probably will for a while. It was quite a sight, that night, looking up at this place to see those flames shooting out of it. Anne ran up here, and according to her found goblins trying to put the flames out."

"Do you think they triggered some kind of trap?"

"Hard to say. The next thing she heard was someone saying 'children should be seen and not heard.' That's when she took the hit. How she made it back I'll never know. She always was stronger than me."

"She'll be fine. She's doing okay in classes isn't she? The pain isn't too much for her?"

"Not to hear her tell it. That chair you found really has made the difference for her."

"Glad to hear it. Hello, what's this?" They neared the house which of course was a wreck. Much of the stonework had survived, but everything was scorched. Aerith looked at the well outside which was untouched.

"It's a well," Sebastian informed her.

"Yes, I know that. Still don't understand why a wizard family would need a well, when they can use magic to make water." She looked around, eyes squinted and arms folded. "Why does this place seem so familiar?"

"Does it?"

"Almost as if..." She looked up and gasped.

"What? Do you see something? There's nothing there."

"No, no, it's what I'm remembering. They would have stood right there." She pointed.

"Who would?"

"The four. The Percival gang. Yes." She ran to the edge of the cliff, looking down. Then got out her broom and flew up to the higher vantage point. Nodding to herself she came back down, landing next to a confused Sebastian.

"Be careful, what if they saw you flying around?"

"I had to *know*. Don't you see, I know this well. This house. This whole place." She swept an arm out to encompass all that the light touches. "I saw it in a memory. It suffered a drought hundreds of years ago. Little Isidora stood at this very well, right here, and watched as magic brought this place back to life, watched as rain started to fall. Watched them *leave her brother to die*. Sebastian, this house belonged to Isidora Morganac!"

## Chapter 30

Through the Looking Glass  
When: Wednesday evening  
Where: Feldcroft

“Who is that?” Sebastian asked, not following her at all.

“A Hogwarts professor from hundreds of years ago. She lived this close to the castle? I don’t get it. If Hogwarts existed than Hogsmead must have as well. Did no one from the village care to help these people who were a two minute broom ride away? If it hadn’t been memories I saw I wouldn’t even believe the story. Can memories be faked? I suppose they could!”

“You’re not making any sense, what are you talking about, memories?”

“She’s at the heart of all this- Isidora. She did something Percival didn’t like. Something I think he buried to try and get rid of. And now the goblins have learned of that something and are trying to find it. He doesn’t want me to have it, but at the same time I’m the only one around that can relate to it or whatever, so he’s in a real bind.”

“Who is this Percival? Slow down!”

“Another Hogwarts professor. Know it all, mostly. He’s a painting now, looks down on me. In more ways than one actually. Why he had his painting done so it towered over us... Never mind that, let’s check the house. But what clues may be here after so long I can’t imagine.”

“Sure, don’t tell me what you’re going on about, it’s fine,” Sebastian muttered. The two went into what was left of the house and looked around. There was a burned up panting sitting there, along with a wagon wheel sitting in the corner. Ahead of them was a fireplace, complete with iron cookpot which Aerith was quite surprised about.

“Would she have spelled her cookpot against rust?” she mused. “And would that charm have lasted so long? This place is basically open to the elements, how is it not a pile of rust right now?”

“Maybe the goblins were using it, that’s what caused the fire?”

“I don’t know, that table is still intact. What’s this?” She picked up a sack which felt like it had coins in it. “Huh.” She dumped them out, a handful of gold glittering there on the table. “Nice! Here, half of these are yours, come get them.” She counted them out and handed half to Sebastian.

“Why? You found it.”

“Party etiquette, don’t complain when a girl hands you gold.” He took them and she put her share away. “It’s bad form. What else do we have around here?”

She ignored the painting, it was burned beyond recognition, and focused on the rest of the room. “It’s weird no one has claimed this spot since then,” she remarked. “I mean, a view overlooking the town? Most people would pay good money to have that. No one could own this land after so long, you think someone would claim it and rebuild. But no, they just let it rot and the whole thing is falling over. There don’t seem to be any ghosts haunting the place that might drive people away. Unless... Hello? Ghosts? Anyone around here?” She waited. “No ghosts.”

“Don’t shout so loud!”

“I ain’t afraid of no ghosts!”

“But you should be afraid of the goblins, they aren’t that far away remember?”

“Ah yes,” she admitted. “I do keep forgetting that.” Several books and papers were scattered about the floor, she grabbed them up, stuffed as many as she could into the cookpot, and put that in her

book. "Look around for a box or something, the way my books works each book would take up space but one crate of books takes up less."

"Move here, move there," he grunted. "You know, there's a lot of greenery around here for this place supposedly being set on fire a few weeks ago."

Aerith looked around. "You're right. There's vines growing all over the inside of the place. What, exactly, caught fire that night? The painting is burned, there was fire here. So odd."

"Someone blocked off the door to the next room," Sebastian told her. "Why do that? It's not like you could hide the fact this house had more than one room. And it would be the work of a whole second for any magic user to clear it."

"You're right. But let's not use magic, maybe that's what triggered the fire? Maybe it's cursed to shoot fire out at anyone that hits it with magic. Because that's what a magic user would do. In any case we can't, the trace."

"Good point. It's just some stones, we can easily move them."

The pair worked together to move the stones, opening the doorway to the next room, which showed a set of stairs going down.

"Did they not have safety standards hundreds of years ago?" Sebastian complained. "Look at this, no railing or door on a set of stairs leading to a basement. You get up one night for a glass of water and are a bit sleepy you'll break your neck tumbling down these stairs from a single misstep. There's nothing to stop you."

"You're right. The wood of the table survived to the present day, a railing would have. Let's go. Don't use lumos, you'll bring the ministry down on us."

"I know that! I've been told it in every other class the last five years. Where have you been?"

The two made their way down the stairs and looked around.

"Who needs this number of chairs?" Sebastian wondered aloud. "Did this Isidora collect them or something?"

He was right. In the gloom, stacked up floor to ceiling, were chairs of various types. There must have been twenty five chairs, more than a house this size could ever fit anywhere. It was really, really weird to see so many chairs in one place, and Aerith put it out of her head before it exploded. But what she did see were "Books! So many books! I need all the knowledge of those books inside me!"

"At least there's plenty of... planters? What are these things?" Stacked next to the chairs were bowls of various materials and sizes. Some metal, some stone. "You can put books in them and have them count as one object, right?"

"You're getting the hang of it! Let me get busy."

"You really want all these old books?"

"They're dry and the ink is still legible," she showed him, cracking one open. "Isidora must have wanted them here for a reason. They could relate to all this."

"I'll help. Never get between a girl and her books my father used to say."

"Really?"

"No, not really."

The pair worked to clean up the piles and piles of books that were hanging around, cramming them into the planters and storing them. Their efforts showed more space behind a bookshelf, which they, with some effort, moved out of the way. Aerith then went over the room, picking up anything that looked of value. There were various jars, jugs and even pans hung on the wall, as well as an old skull from some kind of animal and a stack of skulls she hoped were not human. Because they looked pretty human.

"What are you doing now?" Sebastian asked her.

“Looting the place,” she replied like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Look at this antique shield slash decorative piece thing. I know a guy who can put it up for auction and antiques are always in demand. Don’t worry, I’ll note down what we found together so I can get you your half of the proceeds.”

“You’re a strange girl, you know that?”

“I just wish we could take this statue. Look at it, it’s taller than we are!” She was right. There was a stone statue sitting there, a woman in a robe and cowl, holding a strange staff with a round symbol in front of her face so you couldn’t see it from the front. “It’s too big to fit in the book though.”

“You need to learn a shrinking spell. That’s probably how they got it down here in the first place.”

“Yeah.” She looked between the stairs and the statue. “It does seem awfully big to have fit down the stairs. Even with levitation magic. Doesn’t matter, even if I knew a shrink spell, I couldn’t use it.”

“Trace,” they said together, grinning.

“Is the mirror too big as well?” he asked, walking over to it.

“It’s pretty thin, but basically if I can’t lift it... Hang on, did you say mirror?”

“It’s a mirror,” he agreed. “What do you call something you can see yourself in?” He waved at his image in the big mirror propped up against the wall.

“I see a room. Oh, tricky, tricky. I bet it’s enchanted such that only someone like me can see it. Most of the time these gateways are quite open, you can just walk through them. Isidora wanted this one to be special. Look around, make sure there’s nothing else we can learn from this place and we’ll see where it leads.”

“Quite the adventure we’re on, isn’t it? Very well.”

The two looked around but didn’t find anything else of value to pilfer, or any clues as to who cursed Anne. And really, why would there be? Unless someone accidentally forgot their diary and the last entry was “cursed a young girl that should teach her” there wasn’t much hope for that. So the two returned to the ‘mirror’ and stood before it.

“Put your hand on it, and take my hand,” she instructed. “That should hopefully get you through it.”

“Hopefully? Also, ew, I’m not getting cooties.”

“You’re fifteen Sebastian, grow up. I’m the one taking the risk, boys are notorious for not washing their hands.”

“I... okay I can’t argue with that.” He put his hand on the mirror and took her hand.

“Let’s go.” She slammed a palm into the mirror and the scene changed.

“Hold on, I know this room,” Sebastian announced.

“Who’s there?” another voice said, making both of them jump.

“Ominis?” Sebastian called out.

“Sebastian?” the voice called out. A boy holding a wand that was glowing red at the tip came into view around a column. “Who is with you? How did you get over here without me noticing?”

“It’s Aerith, Ominis.”

“That girl that got you in trouble?”

“I got myself in trouble, we discussed this Ominis!” He belted out a fake sounding laugh. “Got me in trouble, what a kidder!”

“Hello Ominis,” she told him. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Yes, apparently *someone* doesn’t understand the concept of a secret room!” Ominis said, glaring right past Sebastian and talking to the column. “But I didn’t hear the door open. Did I get turned around, the door should be that way.” He moved his wand to a portcullis across the room.

“The door is that way,” Sebastian told him. “We got here a different way. Aerith, welcome to the undercroft. At least that’s what we call it. I think we’re finally going to figure out what it was for.”

“So we’re back at the school?” Aerith asked, shocked. “It all leads back here, doesn’t it? Also, how many secret rooms does this castle have? Double also, how do people keep creating rooms in what should be a solid structure? I don’t understand it.”

“How many do you know about?” Ominis asked.

“One more than you boys,” she answered playfully. “Hang on, now what?”

Across the way a section of wall folded away, revealing a wooden cabinet of some kind.

“Did our going through the way we did trigger something?” Sebastian asked. “Can I have my hand back now, by the way?”

“Oh! Sorry!” She dropped his hand.

“You were holding hands too? Traitor!” Ominis told Sebastian.

“Traitor? Wait, what do you two use this room for, anyway?” *Do I even want to know?*

“Gobstones!” Sebastian hastened to assure her. “Anne, Ominis and I used it as our secret hideout. Don’t give her the wrong impression Ominis.”

“I can tease you all I want, for scaring me like that. And you still haven’t told me how you got here without using the door.”

“A mirror. I’ll tell you the whole story later. Come on.” He went over to check the new feature of the room and found it was a thin frame set into the wall. But it opened up, showing three panels, only one of which had a painting in it. The larger, middle section was quite torn leaving scraps of cloth all around the edge but a fragment of parchment remained stuck to the back. The third, and right panel, looked cleaner having no cloth left stuck into the edges. *Is this supposed to be a clue?*

“As revelations go, this one is a bit underwhelming,” Sebastian remarked.

“I agree,” Aerith agreed.

“What’s going on, this was a wall before!” Ominis complained.

“I’ll describe it, you look the thing over,” Sebastian told her.

“Right.”

The parchment was basically meaningless. Just symbols and sketches of that mechanism Aerith had seen going through the cave with Professor Fig. The one he said had opened the door once he hit it with magic. She put it into the book but really saw nothing of value in it. The scene on the left was a nature scene, a path next to a tall cliff with a tree growing at the top of it. *Well, that’s the scene from hundreds of years ago. That tree is either much bigger, or dead, by now. Probably dead. Even trees don’t live forever.* “It’s just one third of a landscape,” she told the others when Sebastian was done explaining things to Ominis. “I was hoping for more.”

“Me too,” he agreed. “It doesn’t get us closer to solving the mystery of why that mirror led here. What the goblins are looking for by digging in the ground there, or who cursed Anne.”

*Yes, even if they found the mirror, and I can’t see them not finding it as it wasn’t really hidden, they couldn’t use it. Only I can. So they must be looking for something else.* “I’ll take a look at the books later, see if that holds any clues. Otherwise, thanks for the tour Sebastian. If you two can let me out of here I’ll get out of your hair and you can get back to, you know, gobstones or whatever.” She wiggled her eyebrows, totally lost on Ominis of course. (He is blind, did you pick up on that?)

“Just over here. Let me know what you find out.”

“Will do! You two must have a mundane way to get in here. Do you mind showing me how? I could drag the mirror back to the castle but I would rather not.”

“What do you think, Ominis? She already knows about it, you can’t blame me for that one.”

“Fine, she can come in. The place was missing a woman’s touch anyway. Pity Anne hasn’t wanted to join us here since she came back.”

“Missing a woman’s touch?” Sebastian echoed. “How can you even tell that?”

“It’s obvious, you don’t need eyes to see it.”

“Sure, whatever you say.”

“Thank you.” She held her hand out.

“You want to shake hands?” he asked.

“The wand, Sebastian. I need to take the wand back!”

“Oh that! Silly of me, I completely forgot it.”

“Uh huh.” She took it back and headed back up to the office.

“Oh, hello professor,” she greeted Professor Fig. “I’m just returning the wand I borrowed. Don’t mind me.”

“Borrowed?” he asked.

“Yes. I asked Sebastian to show me the area Anne was cursed. I didn’t want him to be defenseless if something happened. You’ll never believe what we found there!”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“A mirror that I could use to get to yet another secret room here at the castle. Turns out he and his friend already knew about it, which isn’t suspicious at all now that I think about it. But it must have been made or at least found by Isidora, the mirror was in her house. Here.” She handed him the scrap of parchment. “See what you can make of this. I got it from a frame with two of the three painted scenes missing in that hidden room. The one that wasn’t was just a random nature scene from hundreds of years ago. I doubt we would even recognize it to see it today.” *If it’s even a place and not just a random artist’s happy little tree.*

“You’ve been busy! Interesting, this symbol-”

“Yes, the same one as in the cave, I noticed that.”

“But the rest of this is garbage. Maybe there’s some hidden meaning, I’ll look it over.”

“Great. Those goblins, they were digging in that area. As Percival refuses to tell us anything and yes, I realize that’s partly my fault, I thought my next mission would be to check out some of the camps I noted down. If I’m invisible I should be able to get at least somewhat close, see if I can at least see anything interesting. They’ll speak their own language to each other so I probably won’t hear anything useful, but still.”

“Is that wise?”

“Of course. Even if I do get caught, I’ll just reset and either approach it differently or try a different site.”

“Even you can be taken by surprise!”

“Eh..... I really can’t though. It’s fine. It’s too late now, I’ll start after classes tomorrow it’ll be too dark. I need to go see your friend the antique dealer before I go to bed, I found more stuff he can put in the auction.”

“If you’re sure. I spoke to George and that man in the top hat, Rowland? He says the story will help but he need some physical proof. You’re familiar with non-magical things, I take it? What do you make of this?” He tapped a small, black, rectangular box that was sitting on his desk. “Ever seen one before?”

“I have no idea what that could be,” she admitted.

“Still fairly new in the non-magical world. It’s called a camera. I’ll show you how to use it. If you’re going to get near goblin sites I thought you could take a few photographs, as they’re called, that we could give George.”

“Photographs?”

“Indeed. Like in the newspaper, that picture of Ranrok? They’re put onto a special film basically capturing that moment in time and allowing others to see it as well. The light is somehow stuck to the page or something, I have no idea how it actually works. Quite amazing it can be done at all, and without magic! Of course it takes magic to make them move, but we can skip that part. Take some photographs and bring it back here. I’ll have the film developed and maybe we can build a better case.”

“I don’t know. Seems like they know exactly what is going on and are choosing to ignore it. But I’ll be there anyway I might as well.”

“You’re not the only one saying that. But what else can we do? Come, I’ll show you how to work this. Now, the amount of film is limited so you only can take a few photographs.”

A half hour later, camera in hand, Aerith went back to her room. She had plenty of homework to do, and it was only Wednesday, the third week of classes. *It’s going to be a long year.*

## Chapter 31

Rescue

When: Thursday evening

Where: The fields around Hogwarts castle

As good as her word, Aerith tore away from the castle as classes ended, determined to get some photographs with this “camera” Professor Fig had given her. He said the light needed to “fill up” the box or some such, so the lighter it was the better the picture would be. If she felt she could hold the camera steady enough, like placing it on a rock or something, she could open the “shutter” for longer and let more light in. But too much light would ruin the “film” making for a delicate process. As the film took at least a day to be sent to the place the camera was made, another to be removed and “developed,” and then a third to return it, she couldn’t exactly use her abilities to take a different photograph if one came out poorly. But she was determined to try.

Discipline was lax around the various sites, and the first few she visited didn’t yield anything interesting. It was almost as if the goblins were simply holding the site and waiting for something to come along so they could do the thing they were there to do. She gave them a quick once over and fled to the next, always making a new return point before getting close. She was taking no chances!

And then she saw it; a huge machine stuck into the ground. The goblins here were stalking about quite unhappy by the looks, and Aerith crept closer, risking invisibility to get a few pictures of the thing. It was a huge cylinder stuck into the ground, she had no idea how big as she couldn’t see how much was in the dirt already. But it was clearly taller than her and several lengths big. *I think it broke down. Look, part of it has been taken apart and those goblins must be arguing about how best to fix it. Something that huge must be difficult to keep running, after all. Is this the drill they’re trying to make with the special metal?* Taking both a “long” and a “short” picture hoping one came out good enough to see she hurried on, wanting to see if she could find one completely above ground.

And she did!

Taking more pictures of this one she was very careful not to get caught. This was exactly what George could use to show people in the ministry the goblins were up to something. Such a device was not going to be used for good, she was fairly sure. *I don’t think they want to help us dig new sewers or a tunnel where witches and wizards can, in single file, travel underground on brooms to avoid the weather. Now maybe an underground train? That could be useful. Look at the size of the thing. The front with all those wicked looking grinding parts is as tall as I am, and it’s solid metal. How can they get something so massive to move? Magic? Are wizards working with them, or do they have enough magic on their own to do so?*

She took photographs from various angles. A long one, a medium one, and a short one. *Imagine if I could somehow see what the camera was seeing, so I didn’t have to guess! Well, maybe one day in the future that will be possible. This film stuff is still pretty new Professor Fig said, non-magical people are just now starting to use it but only the very wealthy can afford something like this. Wonder how they learned of it, George and him. Maybe George is in a department that studies non-magical advancements so wizards know what’s coming from the other side?*

Satisfied she had the proof she needed, and horrified at what the heck they could be doing that needed such huge devices to tunnel under the ground, she headed back. She was coming out of Professor Fig's office when Poppy, eyes red and looking frantic, barreled into her.

"Aerith, you have to help me!" she pleaded.

"What's wrong? Who hurt you Poppy? Did someone tease you again? Did that boy hurt the kneazels? I'll make them pay for it."

"Nothing like that, and thanks, it's really sweet of you to say that. No, I've been calling and calling for Highwing but she won't come. She's not there! She's not there Aerith! What am I going to do?"

"Highwing? Shoot. She was outside the dome because we felt it was still too small for a beast of her size. Naturally the poachers would start going after even larger beasts, as they can't get at the smaller ones." *At least the sanctuary hasn't been breached, Professor Hecat has said it's all quiet there. The others have been using the nab-sack with Professor Howin's help, and have the food situation well in hand. So it's working out, beasts are being saved. But now this, oh Poppy. I'm sorry. I should have moved her to the Room, she could have had the field all to herself. This is my fault.*

"I don't know..." she admitted. She looked up as someone else was coming.

"You can run pretty fast for such a short girl," Natty told her, breathing heavily. "Ah, you found her!"

"She's either in the Room, the library, or doing something with Professor Fig," Poppy told her proudly. "I know my Aerith!"

"That is pretty much true," she admitted.

"What room is this?" Natty asked.

"Room?" *Oh shoot, I never brought Natty to the room! Is she not nice enough for you, Aerith? Not reliable enough? Not white enough? Ugh, I'm a terrible person aren't I? I really am. Shame on you.* "Sorry Natty. I'll give you access to the Room once the current crisis is over. But really I have no idea what we're going to do about this." *I could cross the goblin camps off the list, there's only fifty or so to check. My book just records them as camps, maybe I can remember which are which and check the bigger ones, it would have to be a big camp to hold a big beast.*

"As I keep trying to tell her, I may be able to help," Natty told them.

"Yes, there's a slim hope if they've taken her somewhere. How would we even narrow it down quickly enough is... What did you say?"

"Turns out she's as bad as you," Poppy told her, drying her eyes. "I saw her sneaking back into the castle, and she saw me out trying to whistle for Highwing. We compared notes and came to find you."

"Sneaking out? Naughty girl!" she playfully mocked. Then she switched to sultry. "I didn't know you had a wild side, Miss Onai. Tell me more... immediately."

She snorted. "You don't know how wild I can get. But I'm not out there for pleasure. I'm trying to find out what Rookwood is up to. He reminds me too much of men back in my homeland. I know what they are capable of if not stopped. I have a fair idea where they would take such a prize catch. I only hope we are not too late."

"Show me," Aerith told her. "Poppy, we'll get Highwing back-"

"I'm coming along. She was my friend first. My only friend, for years and years. Until you came along." She blushed.

"My pass only covers one. We would all get in trouble."

"Perhaps you missed the part where I sneak out all the time?" Natty reminded her. "I would not deny her the power to act. Come, before it is too late."

"Very well, on your own heads be it. Let's go."

The three, flying in a tight formation, discussed the site they were about to visit and how they would go about things.

“As there are three of us, I recommend us splitting up,” Natty told them.

“Splitting up? Never split the party, Natty!” Poppy scolded her.

“We must. You two will work together to rescue Highwing. I must search the castle for evidence of wrongdoing by Rookwood. It may be my only chance.”

“I could do the same trick, summon the ministry by casting a bunch of spells to set off the trace. They seem eager to catch who is doing that.”

“Then we would have Rookwood’s goons and the ministry people to worry about catching us,” Natty countered. “While the ministry wouldn’t outright kill us for trespassing, it still wouldn’t be pleasant.”

“Can we create a distraction without magic somehow?” Poppy asked. “I mean I’m going to suggest beasts of some kind, they’re fantastic, and I know where to find them, but that’s just me.”

Aerith pulled up on her broom, making the others zoom away and have to turn around to catch up. “Poppy, I think you’ve just hit on a solution. And luckily I know where to find some too. Come on. Incidentally, how do you feel about spiders? If a few were killed, would that be okay?”

“Kill as many spiders as you want,” she agreed. “They’re horrible!”

“Right. This way,” she told them, consulting the book.

The three worked together. The two girls would attract the attention of one of the spiders, Poppy knew their habits despite being repulsed by them. It would then chase them, right into the open nab-sack held by Aerith. *Good thing I got that back in class today.*

“This is working,” Natty announced after the seventh spider was sucked up by the sack. “They won’t know what hit them.”

“They hunt by vibrations you know,” Poppy told them. “Terrible eyesight. That’s the trick most people don’t know. If you’re near one, just stand still and they’ll basically ignore you. Even if one is climbing on you, as long as you don’t move they’ll think you’re just a rock or something and you’ll be fine.”

“You know a lot about them,” Natty told her, pleased.

“Reading about them in books is fine. Do we have enough?”

“I want a few more, there’s another nest over that way. Then some of those bog monster things if we can get them. The annoying ones with the really tough skin and the poison tongue? We need all the distraction we can get.”

Once that was done the girls hovered over the place Natty brought them to. As usual for the area it was a small castle, one that wasn’t too far gone. She could still see places where there were holes though, making her shake her head. *Was a repair spell just too much effort for these people? If I took over an ancient castle, I would want it to be as sound as possible. These people have no idea what they’re doing.*

“Looks like several ways in,” she explained. “We’re going to drop their new friends in through that wall section there.” She pointed. “Natty, when you hear the alarm be raised and people are drawn to that area, you move it. Poppy and I will enter through that way.” She pointed again. “We’ll find Highwing and bust her out. We’ll wait as long as we can for you, but... Here.” She took off her belt and flew closer to her, helping her belt it on. “Stick anything you find into the book. It’s automatic, it’ll just get sucked in. We can go through it all later, something must incriminate them!”

“I’ll do my best. Thank you for this.”

“Don’t lose it, I’ve got a lot of stuff in there. Actually, no waiting. We both get in and we both get out. Meet by the castle entrance. Not this castle, Hogwarts castle. Okay, everyone good with the plan?”

“Ready!” Natty told her.

“Let’s go get my friend back!” Poppy agreed.

*If she’s even here. But if not, well, I can rewind to... now... and we can try somewhere else.*

“Operation rescue Highwing is a go then.” She and her friends vanished.

Aerith opened the sack with the intent to let the spiders and such out, they had come across a few dog looking things that were just absolutely enraged that anything but them existed. They attacked without hesitation, and Aerith had scooped them up as well. One by the one beasts were ejected from the sack and started hunting around the castle. “That’s all of them, let’s get into position.”

“Right.”

They didn’t have to wait long, shouts of alarm and magic lit up the darkening castle as the sun was going down.

“Let’s go. Quiet now.” *Ugh, no place to put my broom. I’ll have to carry it.* The girls darted into the keep, the distraction working like a charm as they saw no one in the hallways. They wound their way around the castle, poking into rooms quickly and verifying no captured beasts. She did find a room with some papers tacked up on the wall which she took down, folding them up quickly and putting them in her pocket.

“Keys!” Poppy announced softly. “I found a keyring.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

Only a moment later they went up some stairs and found Highwing there, along with another chained up hippogriff that was darker in color. Poppy gave a shout of delight and went visible again, dropping the broom and throwing her arms around Highwing.

“Poppy, the keys. Hug later!”

“Right, sorry!” She started trying the keys, making Aerith wish for both an unlocking locks spell and the ability to use it without further showing the ministry where she was. *This trace thing is really annoying. I could freeze them or blast them otherwise pretty easily.* “Got it. Now for you.” She bowed low, but the beast wasn’t stupid and bowed back. Freedom awaited them. Poppy got to work.

“What have we here?” a gruff voiced rang out. The girls froze.

“Thought it might be some kinda distraction,” said a man, coming up the stairs with his wand drawn. “I’m a smart one, see. Now, maybe you best back away from that beast before- Wack!” He gave a cry of surprise as Highwing lunged for him. Aerith watched in horror as the man was torn to pieces right in front of her. He didn’t stand a chance, the hippogriff’s powerful beak and claws ripping parts of him off, splashing blood everywhere. *I think I’m going to be sick. The smell. Yup, here it comes.* She vomited into the straw as Highwing started snapping up the man’s remains, probably hungry because why would these poachers feed her well? Poppy just seemed satisfied and went back to fitting keys into the locks. She knew they weren’t out of danger yet. “It’s done, are you okay?” she asked. The other hippogriff was now free, looking expectantly at the wall that was to be their escape route. Aerith vaguely wondered why they kept flying beasts in a place they could just fly out of if they ever got free, but there was no time for that.

“She just ripped that man apart!” she managed.

“He deserved it. That said, yes, I’m trying not to think about it.”

“Not think about it? Poppy, she’s covered in...” she retched, but tried to get control again, “covered in that man’s blood.”

“Worry about it later. Let’s go!”

*I should have taken the nab-sack with me, it’s still in the book. Should I repeat this? But I really don’t want to watch that man get torn apart again, and I have no way to prevent it. It’s that or kill him with magic before he gets here. But then we’re back to the ministry problem.* “Fine.” *I hope you’re*

*doing okay Natty.* They jumped on their brooms again and took off, the two beasts following behind. No shouts of alarm were raised, the poachers had bigger problems.

Ten minutes later an exhilarated Natty landed by the gate. She looked over the two hippogriffs. “You found them, then? Wonderful!”

“I hope your part was a success?”

“Yes it was. Is that blood?”

“Don’t remind me, please. Book?”

“It worked like a charm, I have plenty of things to go over. Something must be useful to get Rookwood and Harlow behind bars.”

“Harlow?”

“He works for Rookwood.”

“Oh.”

She took the book and got out the nab-sack. “I’ll take you someplace safe,” she promised both creatures. “This won’t hurt a bit.” She sucked them in, and finally breathed a sigh of relief. “Come on, let’s put them in the Room and get the evidence out so we can go over it.”

“Aerith, thank you,” Poppy told her. “I would hug you, but I think we’re both a bit delicate right now. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I’ll hug you and thank you properly. But just know I really appreciate what you did tonight.”

“It’s okay, Poppy. I know. Highwing is my friend too. We’ll keep her safe together.”

“Okay.”

After Natty was finished exclaiming over both parts of the Room and the two hippogriffs were exploring their new section, (they had been fed as well) the girls got out the records they had captured. Looking them over it seemed there were records of sales, but sadly in some kind of code and the name of the buyers weren’t mentioned.

“They’re trying to raise a lot of gold quickly,” Natty decided. “But whatever for?”

“To buy metal so goblins can construct huge machines that can tunnel under the earth,” Aerith told them.

“That explains this,” Poppy held up a letter. “They want a phoenix. There are people that would pay a lot for a bird like that. They’re pretty rare. And I’ve heard of horrific experiments done on them, trying to figure out how they reincarnate upon death. Forcing them to age and die over and over again, gathering the ashes they leave behind. It’s horrible. If there’s any phoenix in this area we have to find it first.”

“Agreed,” Aerith told her. *And I can probably use the book. I’ve covered a lot of this area if there’s a phoenix around here we’ll find it.* “With my sanctuary in place they’ll need to find rare beasts to sell now. We can tell Professor Howin in class, maybe she would have some idea if one has been spotted in the area. And step up our efforts to find more beasts before Rookwood does.”

That night Aerith found it hard to sleep, her mind going back to that man being torn apart. Highwing had protected them, she didn’t know they couldn’t use magic just that she and her friends were in danger. She acted. And she hadn’t wasted time on being sad about it, in fact to her humans were just another source of meat. But to Aerith that was a person. A misguided person, perhaps, but did that mean they should be killed in such a way? No, of course not. When she finally dropped off her dreams were of being being ripped apart, her being ripped apart, beaks and claws all around her. She awoke the next morning twisted up in her sheets and soaking wet.

“Are you okay?” Tina asked her, coming down from the top bunk. “You don’t look so good.”

## Chapter 32

Breaking

When: Friday morning

Where: The dorm

“Who do you even talk to about something like this?” Tina asked, sitting next to Aerith on her bunk. Aerith had told her the whole story, how she had witnessed the attack and subsequent ‘dine and dash’ on the part of Highwing.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Telling you has helped, a little?”

“I am here for you, whatever you need. I mean I already missed my bathroom time slot so I’m gonna have to go all the way, like, to the other side of the castle or whatever and still hope I make it to class so you can see how serious I am about this.”

“Thanks, Tina,” she said with a chuckle.

“Do you think anyone else died?”

She shook her head. “I guess it’s possible. I just wanted a distraction, and really spiders versus wizards should be no contest. But I gathered up a lot of them? If I could just use magic without the ministry swooping in I could paralyze them or stun them. Sneaking around with the disillusionment charm going, especially at night, would make that almost trivial. There were never more than two or three poachers in one place, with the others there we could even get into position and stun them all at once. Everybody would have lived. But no, despite the fact they would have killed Highwing and that other hippogriff I would have been the one in trouble if that happened.”

“It is messed up. I still can’t believe they were on your case about the whole troll thing. You should have gotten a medal, order of Merlin or something, not a warning. But you got the evidence, right? They’ll have to do something!”

“Will they though?” she countered. “George, and others for that matter according to Professor Fig, have been trying to convince their superiors to take all this seriously. Still nothing. I’m afraid we send this material to George it’ll just get into the hands of whoever is being bribed to look the other way and vanish again.”

Tina sat in thought a moment. “So if we have a good idea of what’s going to happen, let’s do something else to make sure it doesn’t.”

*Like returning after something bad happens but without the ability to return? I think others call that ‘thinking ahead.’* “But what, though?”

“The way I see it,” she got up and started pacing, “and from what you told me, basically everybody knows Rookwood and his gang are up to no good. They cursed Anne, for crying out loud, and still nothing was done. But at the same time, no one is stepping up to do anything about it.”

“How can they?” Aerith questioned. “There’s just as many goblins and Ashwinders out there than there are people living in Hogsmeed! It’s crazy the number of followers they have. I don’t know how he got so many people on his side but we can’t go to war with them!”

“But there are wizards and witches living in all sorts of places, this just happens to have a high concentration of them because of the proximity of the school. We need to get everyone, and I mean everyone in the wizarding world, screaming about all this. Force the ministry to act, or be exposed as bribe takers or worse. Part of the problem.”

“Okay, but how do a couple of young girls do that?”

“Easy!” she replied with a grin. “You’ve got the evidence, don’t you? Even in code they’ve helpfully written it all down for us. Send it to the Daily Prophet instead of the ministry. Contact someone for interviews with Anne, or other residents of Feldcroft. They can get it in front of more people than we can. That’s what the paper is there for.”

*We could even have the pictures of those drilling devices sent in, if they’re good enough,* she realized with a start. *Get everybody asking questions about exactly what they think they’re doing.* “Tina... that could actually work.”

“Better than just letting it get buried. Now, are you okay? Because we really do have to get to class.”

“Right, wouldn’t want witnessing someone get torn to pieces, or saving the wizarding world from goblins to get in the way of my stupid class schedule. Thanks, Tina, talking with you really has helped. We’ve got them, and the court of public opinion will turn the tide and force them to do something. Hopefully that will be the end of it.”

“I did mean what I said before though, I’m here if you need to talk more. I don’t expect... what you saw... to be made any easier just because of the last five minutes. I mean, I can hardly kill a mosquito to think you were right there when that happened? I’d be wreck for sure. And you can’t exactly tell an adult, I mean even Professor Weasley would think twice about letting you out of the castle if she thought you were putting yourself in that much danger. Or were seeing things like *that*.”

*Maybe Professor Fig? I don’t know, he’s in my corner and knows how dangerous the world is, because of his wife’s death. But he too may try to ‘keep me safe’ by keeping me away from what must be done.* “You’re right. I need an adult I can talk to confidentially, that is just there to help me and not judge me.”

“No one like that at this school. With all the crazy stuff that goes on, maybe there should be. Magic, man. Crazy. You going to be okay?”

She nodded. “I’ll get through today. If I have nightmares like that again tonight though...”

“We’ll get through it,” she promised, giving her arm a squeeze. “I’ll tell the others too. We’ll look out for you.”

“Thanks.”

That afternoon, as usual, Aerith went to the Room to pour over books, and do homework. She had spoken with Professor Fig who said he had paid extra for priority film processing, so they should have the photographs from the camera early tomorrow morning. He agreed with Tina, given the ministry’s inaction thus far, and had specified several copies of each photograph be made. He would still send them along to George, but that sending them to the paper wasn’t a bad idea and could drum up more support should they “get lost” somewhere along the way. He noticed she didn’t seem her usual self but accepted that she had simply had trouble sleeping the night before. She felt like she could use a nap now, but other matters were more pressing. And in fact there might be something new, as Deek had lit up once she walked in and seemed to be arguing with himself in the corner, though she had caught her name a few times.

“What is it Deek?” she asked. “If there’s something you need, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Ah, Deek apologizes for disturbing Miss. Deek is not sure how to broach the subject, and Deek knows Miss is very busy with schoolwork and Deek should not be selfish with requests just because Deek is worried about Deek’s friend-”

“Just ask,” Aerith told him, a bit annoyed now.

“Yes. Ask. Deek has this friend, Tobbs, who works collecting leach juice for his master. Tobbs does this in a cave near Hogwarts. Tobbs’ master doesn’t let Tobbs leave the cave, and Deek knows the cave is infested with spiders.”

*Oh crap. Don’t tell me...*

“Deek hasn’t heard from Tobbs in some time. Deek fears the worst. Would Miss be willing to brave the cave, and learn the fate of Tobbs?”

Aerith got down on one knee and took Deek’s hand. “I’ll be happy to make sure your friend is okay.” *Or find the person responsible if he is not.*

“Thank you, Miss. I hope it will not take Miss long. Deek can mark the location of the cave if you show Deek your map.”

Aerith left, not bothering to take anyone else this time as realistically for a mission like this the fewer people in danger the better. She quickly flew to the location on the map and landed, looking around. It was a pretty dismal place, possibly an abandoned mine, with rough planks strewn about the entrance. She did snort and shake her head as she headed in, there were a dozen or more signs warning about spiders in the area. Like it was someone’s job to put up a sign but they went way overboard or something? They all looked to be about the same age, the paint was pretty worn on them, but they just kept going as she crept forward. They got more elaborate too, even showed a splash of color with a red X and a skull. There was an upturned palm with “extreme danger” written above it, and yes more skulls over there.

*And this ‘master’ thought that, sure, that’s a good place for my house elf to be. The extreme danger cave. Sure.*

Moving further into the cave she spotted a workbench with various vials, cauldrons, bottles and other potion making paraphernalia that she gleefully scooped up and put into her book. Everything was labeled, neatly organized, and just sitting there ripe of the taking.

*I mean if you’re just going to leave all this stuff out here for anyone to come by and take, you can’t fault someone for coming by and taking it. Right? Right. Hello, what’s this?*

She picked up the note about how Tobbs had missed his quota “by three phials.” She stared down at it, eyes hard as she read about him now needing to punish himself, not getting any food for a week, and needing to make up the shortfall plus five phials the next week. There was no signature, but she tucked it away as evidence and continued on. It didn’t take long to come upon another wooden case full of glass jars which also went into the book, along with the various mushrooms she had seen along the way. “Tobbs?” she called out. “Are you around here?” *I don’t want to call too loudly. No spiders here but Poppy said they hunt by vibrations. Does that mean sound too?* She moved on, past a series of narrow passageways and here she started to run into spiders. Flattening herself against the wall, invisibility spell running, she watched as they passed by. *Poppy was right, as long as I stay still they don’t seem to notice me. It’s not like they would remember an extra bit of rock in this passageway as interesting enough to look into. They’re spiders. I mean they may not be goldfish but I doubt their memory is that good even if they could see me. Forgive me for not testing that theory I’m going to stay nice and invisible. But I will try this.* She picked up a stone and hurled it down the end of the passage, and the spiders took off running in that direction. *They are sensitive to vibration, that’s for sure! That’s right, you just go over there. I have no beef with you, nor chicken, nor mutton. No reason to slaughter the lot of you, you’re just doing your spider thing and I have great respect for that. Okay, let’s tip-toe out of here.*

She came to another work bench, and stalked over to it, as there was another note on it. This one brought her up short as it wasn’t from Tobbs’ master, but Tobbs himself. He had used up all the easy to reach leaches in this area and was moving further into the cave. *You know, it occurs to me that Tobbs was not that bright. He could have simply ‘farmed’ them by collecting them, and allowing them to breed. They must reproduce fairly quickly, right? Then just take the older ones for this ‘master.’ Still, I can’t apply my way of thinking to another person, especially one who didn’t get the education I did. Elves being seen only as servants, I doubt they’re given much in the way of higher learning. I mean look where I am.*

There wasn't much to swipe here so she moved on. Past more spiders, and down, down, down into the cave she went. Once more she found a sort of camp site, with wood neatly stacked, various boxes and barrels to one side, and leaves drying on a line above. "Tobbs?" she called. *No Tobbs. Where could he be?*

She bent to pick up another bit of parchment that was lying there. It was written simply enough.

Master,

If you find Tobbs' body, the big spider was too much.

Tobbs has failed you and deserves this punishment.

Tobbs feels weak. Sleepy. Tobbs must

Aerith ground her teeth together, her somewhat muted rage at this 'master' forcing the poor elf to do all this beginning to grow hotter. *What else did Poppy tell me about spiders? The big ones are the same as the smaller ones non-magical people deal with. They inject a venom into their prey and wrap them up. The venom turns the victim into a slush, which they slurp up. And I see drag marks. Oh no.*

She continued forward, entering a large chamber where a big spider sat thinking spider like thoughts. Or so she assumed. Scanning the walls she found it, a sack that hadn't been opened yet, and she carefully, step by step, inch by inch, made her way over there. She was able to reach it and yank it down, causing the spider to snap out of it and look in her direction. She froze, and after an eternity it turned away again. *Come on Tobbs, let's get you out of here.* The bundle was light, but once back in relative safety she set it down on the table and tore the top of it open. An elf's face met her gaze.

"I'm sorry, Tobbs. I was too late." She blinked back tears. "Come on. We need to tell your 'master' what's happened. That's going to go well for him, unless of course it doesn't."

She made her way out of the cave, back past the spiders, grief and anger mixing in her heart. This was different from that Ashwinder's death. That had been brutal, sudden, and not wholly undeserved. But to force this tiny elf to basically live in this cave, try to deal with the spiders and collect, what, a bit of juice from leaches? That you could find around any riverbank? Tobbs' master was guilty of murder, there was no question about that. She had the evidence, the letters between them. The body. Everything she had picked up in the cave.

He was going to *pay*.

Back at the school she went right to the Room, and Deek's ears wilted as he saw what she was carrying.

"I was too late, Deek," she told him. "Your friend is gone."

"Deek was sure this was so, Miss. Deek will miss his friend and will perform last rites if Miss will allow it." He raised his arms, to take the body.

"Deek..." She hesitated. "We have to report this. I have the evidence we need, you know who his master was, right? He can face the consequences for his actions."

"Oh no," Deek sighed. "Miss... Aerith is too kind to suggest this, but to a wizard, and how can Deek put this, to a wizard an elf is just a thing. To be discarded when no longer useful. No punishment will come of this, by the ministry or any other. No elf can sue for justice against a wizard, it is simply not done. It is best if Tobbs simply disappears."

"You can't mean that," she gasped. "You have no rights at all? That's crazy! How... How?"

"It is the way it has always been, Aerith. Perhaps how it will always will be. You cry... For Tobbs? For an elf? Deek is truly humbled to see this."

"I'm going to do more than that. You know where this person lives?"

"Deek does know, yes. But Deek wonders what Aerith has in mind."

"Can you take me there?"

"It would be a strain, but yes, Deek could carry you there."

"Do it. Now."

"Deek must follow Aerith's commands, but Deek does not want any trouble."

"No trouble Deek. Simply justice. Let's go."

"Very well." Deek took her hand and snapped, and Aerith found herself outside a fairly large house somewhere.

"Stay back, Deek." She marched up to the door and pounded on it until someone came.

"What in the blazes is going on out- oh it's just a girl. What do you want?" said the man that answered. He was better dressed than Rowland had been, and sneered down at her.

*Just a girl?* "I am here to inform you that your house elf was found dead in the cave. As you can see spiders were responsible."

"Is that was that is?" he asked, wrinkling his nose. "However did you- no I don't care. I don't suppose any of the material he gathered was saved?"

"No sir," she managed. "It seems looters got to it. Probably Rookwood, his men were known to operate in the area."

"How tiresome. I'll have to restart the whole operation with another elf. Thank you for informing me. Good night." He started to close the door.

*Start it again with another elf? No, I don't think so.* "You don't want the body?" she asked.

"I suppose it's my responsibility after all," he moaned, clearly put out by all this. "Come in. You can toss it into the waste heap out back." He opened the door and turned away, letting her enter.

*Waste heap? This was a living being you... You... Aaarg!*

She gently set Tobbs down and followed the man in, looking around to make sure she was unobserved, and drawing her wand. She had given him every opportunity to show even a shred of decency, and he had failed. But throwing the body away, not even bothering to bury it? That had been the last straw. He glanced behind him. "Yes, just through here. Don't touch anything. And I say, bring the body you stupid girl. You don't expect me to carry it do- what are you doing?"

*Stupid girl? I know it's 1890 but come on, have a little decency will you?* Aerith pointed the wand at him, drawing upon the most ancient of magics within her. A doorway formed behind the man, leading back into the deepest part of the cave where the big spider was. He looked around, realizing he was without his wand at the moment because why would you carry it around in your own house? "Balancing the scales," she told him coldly. "Depulso!" He went flying backwards, through the door and into the cave. He screamed as he realized where he was, pure terror both at the size of the creature that was now barreling down on him, but utterly unable to understand *how* he had suddenly been taken there. This scream was cut off as the doorway winked out of existence. "Revelio." She looked around, not seeing anyone in the immediate area and with a nod, pointed her wand at the nearest flammable thing. "Incendio." This she repeated several times, setting the house ablaze, (it was all fairly old and dry wood naturally. Fine furniture and such, that would burn nicely) and ran back out the door. She scooped up Tobbs and Deek ran over to her. "Ministry will be here any second with all that," she told him. "Let's go back to the school. Outside so he can be buried."

"What did Aerith do?" he asked, wide eyed at the flames through the window.

"Explain later, go now!"

"Very well."

Another snap and a moment later some very confused ministry people totally failed to put out the fire that burned the poor man's house to the ground. The flames were unlike anything they had ever seen, moving as if with a life of their own, and consuming every bit of the man's house, yet still managing to never go beyond it. When it was done, when the fires had burned high and consumed all they simply vanished, leaving nothing but ashes and silence. All agreed they would never speak of that night again.

Not long after Deek said goodbye to his friend and Aerith helped bury him on a hill overlooking the castle. She left him in thought as she walked back to the castle.

*I may be developing some issues.*

## Chapter 33

Castle

When: Saturday morning

Where: Great Hall

At breakfast the next day Aerith was letting her friends do the talking, sighing a bit and thinking about the last week. She had, after all, used her magic to basically kill somebody, inflicting upon them the same fate as they had inflicted upon another. On the one hand this was justice, and for an elf that insisted no justice was possible for one of his kind. On the other it was murder, far worse than trying to steal a few whiskers from a beast. It was not her responsibility to dispense justice in the world, and in fact if any of her friends or professors learned of it, they would rightly be horrified at what she had so casually done. She couldn't even tell Poppy about it, and naturally had not written a diary entry about her crimes. First rule of committing a crime, really, don't brag about it where anyone might see.

*And that idiot Percival thinks solving a few puzzles and beating up some stupid statue things somehow informs me how I'm supposed to use this power. What a joke. But that guy would have done the same to another elf. Killed a living, thinking, being for his shrinking juice or whatever he was making with the slugs. Slugs! The easiest animal in the world to simply gather up and start breeding in your own basement if you want a bunch of them. It's not like they'll attack you if they get too big, like spiders. Some elf will live a different life because of me. But I need to do something about this, when I'm older. There simply can't be no repercussions for those that abuse elves. But I can't just go around killing people either. Can you even imagine it? Solving all my problems with violence? What would that turn me into? Now a bit of shouting at a painting, that's a different story. But I did go off and simply squish that guy, and I can't get into that habit. Even if I'm enraged at something, I have to follow the laws too. If I don't, what does that make me? The way Deek was looking at me, I couldn't tell if it was absolute terror or admiration that someone finally stood up for him. Stupid ministry, everybody has to be equal under the law or what's the point? Forcing that elf to live in that dangerous cave-*

The daily owls swooped in, and Aerith had a packet dropped beside her as she expected. *Think about that later, I have things to do.* Breaking the seal she dumped out the photographs, hoping at least one would be usable. Professor Fig had told her he specified making them as large as they could be made, and Aerith had to admit it was pretty amazing. She looked through the stack to find the ones she had taken, and for a wonder they weren't half bad. She was holding in her hand a piece of the past.

"What's that?" Jo asked, pointing to it. She had leaned back a little and looked around the front of the photo.

"What the goblins are doing out in the countryside," she told her. "And the next reason I have to go shout at a painting to give me some answers before they find what they're looking for."

"No, I mean, what's that?" She wiggled the corner of the photo.

"Hey, be careful I have no idea how fragile these things are!" She pulled it away. "It's a photograph, something developed by the non-magical world. You capture light and put it on a piece of film. It's the latest thing."

"Capture... light?"

"Don't look at me, I don't know exactly how it works. He just showed me how to use the camera thing. We need evidence to send to the paper about how big a threat the goblins are, and this is

it. I'm going to take them to Professor Fig right away so he can get them sent to the paper. See you later."

Twenty minutes later Professor Fig and Aerith made their way down to the map room and she held up the photograph for Percival. He had zipped off to see someone at the paper who was expecting him, and zipped back. Outside the castle walls, of course, so he could simply wish himself from place to place. *This is why he made them so big.* "So what is Ranrok digging for, exactly?" she demanded to know.

"Digging? Whatever give you the idea something is buried around here?"

"You can see what I'm holding, right?"

"Not really. Bring it closer." She did, and Percival bent over as much as he could to try and see it. "What is it?"

"A machine taller, longer, and bigger around than I am. See this one?" she switched for the one stuck in the ground. "It's meant to chew up the earth. He's digging for something. You're going to tell me why."

"And if I don't?"

"The ministry may just say they're digging for iron deposits or something," Professor Fig spoke up. "We need to prove they're digging for something dangerous if we're going to mobilize enough people to overcome whatever nonsense is going on there and demand action."

"Perhaps they are!"

"Don't give me that," Aerith scoffed. "You don't just dig up the countryside looking for metal. Goblins are far too smart for that." *I mean it's in veins in mountains or something, right? Mines are always near mountains. I wonder why? Huh...*

"Don't be difficult, Percival," said another voice, and another man came into view to his right. "She has the magic, and the mistakes really were ours. She needs to learn from them and if goblins are after it, she's really the only one that can protect it properly at this point."

*What is 'it'? I need specifics, man!*

He sighed. "Very well. Aerith, Professor Fig, meet Charles Rookwood."

"Rookwood?" she gasped. "Wait, that's a last name?"

"Yes, his name is Victor, didn't you know that?" Professor Fig asked.

*Victor? As in victory? I don't think so.* "No, I didn't. Everyone just calls him Rookwood. Don't tell me you're related to this guy?"

"Er, it's nice to meet you too?"

"Yes, yes, have some tea, make yourself at home. Blah blah. Is this Victor related to you somehow?"

"He could be as we seem to share a last name."

"Well, that explains a few things," she mused, starting to pace. *First off how low the mighty have fallen.* "So knowledge of whatever it is Isidora did was kept in the family." *I'm not the only one that has a diary after all.* "But without anyone to see the magic and do the so called trials there was no way to access whatever they buried. At least, in the normal way. But Victor isn't going to take that as an answer. He asks the goblins to build him machines that can dig in the ground. 'I'll do that,' says the goblin, 'but it's going to be expensive.' So he gets a bunch of people together, promises them some part of this treasure or whatever and they start capturing beasts. Sold for their parts he gets a bunch of money together and the goblins start building machines. But now this Ranrok fellow knows something is buried around here and doesn't need Victor anymore. He does his own research... Hummm... Was whatever they're looking for goblin made?"

"I'm not going to answer that!" Percival insisted.

"So that's a yes. He finds those records and decides he's going to take it for himself. He funds even more digging machines and tells his followers to spread out and check likely sites. But what could

be so important that he would move out in the open like this? Even bribing ministry officials he can't bribe everybody! Some people, like George, are going to look into it and make a stink."

"I agree, knowing what we're going to find at the end of all this would help us prepare to protect it," Professor Fig stated. "Is it mobile? Can we hide it somewhere else? Really what could be worth so much risk? Did she enchant some kind of weapon made by goblins? I don't understand why she would have made such a thing in her time. The goblin's attitude I can somewhat comprehend, I've seen them go to great lengths to get goblin made artifacts returned. Nothing like this though!"

*Did she feel she needed protection from a bunch of old men?*

"All will be revealed in time," Charles told them. "Now, if you would look to the map I'll show you the place you will need to go for the second trial."

*Really not going to just tell us, huh? Fine, let's get it over with.*

The location was, naturally, a castle the man owned at some time in the past that was, naturally, a wreck at the moment.

*You know, when this is all over I'm going to smash to pieces any old falling apart castle out there and make myself a really big castle with all the stone. It's stupid to have all these crumbling ruins instead of, I don't know, a place where someone could actually live? Why are there so many ruins out there?*

The pair flew their brooms out there and circled the place, high above it. The outer wall was surprisingly intact, and in fact this structure was more of a proper "castle" than Hogwarts. It was a thick outer wall with a large courtyard in the middle, complete with towers on each corner and a walkway between each. That's where most of the damage was they could see, parts of the walkways having long collapsed and any wooden doors long rotted away. They landed behind the place and went invisible.

"So Charles said we needed to get to the basement of the place," Professor Fig reminded her.

"Right. But I have a hunch. I did a revelio in the air and there's a camp not far from here. Let's walk over there rather than try to sneak through this whole decrepit castle full of people who would not be very pleased to see us."

"How is that any better?"

"You'll see."

The pair went to the nearby camp, which looked abandoned, and Aerith nodded. As she thought there was a tunnel leading in the direction of the castle, and the pair quickly made their way inside it.

"One of those digging machines made this?" Professor Fig asked once they were a good distance inside and there was no risk of being heard. He had to crouch a bit but put a hand on the wall. It was fairly smooth, and looked like a giant worm had just gone through here leaving a tunnel.

"It's big enough," she agreed. "But how are they powering it? Where is the dirt going?"

"Don't underestimate goblin ingenuity."

"Ha! Wait until you see one!" *Actually, where is it? Moved to another site I would imagine. How fast are those things above the ground?*

The pair entered the castle and Aerith got an answer to her question. Following the deep tracks it made she reconstructed what happened. *It punched through the wall here, then rolled over here and... smashed into this wall here? Where it's now stuck?*

"You were right," Professor Fig told her. "It's a fantastic contraption. Strange they just left it, though."

"I know! These things must be extremely expensive to produce, they locked Rowland up trying to get more metal for the drilling part. But now they've just abandoned this one."

They two looked it over. Just the solid iron wheels were almost as tall as Aerith was, and various pipes, chains, and knobs were connected to the thing. *I can't even imagine what just one wheel*

*weighs. To think this thing could move around and make that long tunnel? They really are skilled, these goblins.* The “driver” would sit in an almost enclosed area, making Aerith believe that it would be a really dirty place to be as the thing moved underground, and it was really, really stuck in the wall and the floor.

“Must have been out of control or it simply sank here. Still, digging it out would be cheaper than making a new one. In any case, let’s press on. Once this is over it can be recovered and studied, but it doesn’t look any more complex than a locomotive. Just smaller and with a different purpose.”

“Right.” *It would take several wizards to levitate it out of there, even after freeing the wheels. One of them is sunk into the ground almost up to the top! The floor must not have been strong enough to hold it up, that’s how heavy it is.*

The pair moved forward, past the usual assortment of boxes, burlap sacks, and the largest iron cookpot Aerith had ever seen. Naturally she grabbed all of it. As well as trunks, various books stacked on a sad looking bookcase, a ladder, then around a corner she gasped and ran to the shelves and shelves of books just waiting to be recovered.

“We don’t have time for all of them!” he hissed.

“But... Books!”

“Yes, I see the books. Later. We can come back here for them later.”

“There must be a thousand book here!” she breathed, making a quick estimate. *Twenty five to a shelf, forty five shelves. They’re taller than I am. How did he afford so many books, hundreds of years ago they must have been far more expensive than they are today. It’s mind boggling.*

“Yes, I can only imagine what they contain. Come on.”

“Very well.” *I’ll be back for you, my pretties. Don’t you go anywhere now!* She stole the art off the walls, the very expensive looking large, freestanding globes one of which looked like it was resting on the back of a *solid gold dragon*. Then she turned to the fireplace. Before it was a leather chair and most out of place a small table with a tea pot and delicate looking china cup. She looked up, down, all around. It looked so out of place she could hardly process it. “Why is there still a tea pot sitting here?” she asked. “It wasn’t packed away when the castle was closed up? I know, I know, better things to be doing.” She took them both as well, then shrugged and took the table too. The chair was too big.

“I say, what *are* you doing?” said a voice. Charles was now in a portrait above the fireplace. “You’ve been stealing anything that’s not nailed down!”

“She calls it looting the place,” Professor Fig announced. “A bad habit, but what can I do?”

“Especially as half the proceeds go right into your coin pouch,” Aerith reminded him. “I did get the first money from the auction. You didn’t turn it down.”

“Well, yes, a teacher’s salary, you know how it is. Cost of living always goes up and whatnot.”

“Uh huh. You really want all this stuff to just turn to dust down here? I don’t. So, it comes with me as I have the means. Now, where’s the next archway so we can get on with the completely pointless ‘trial’ that awaits us?”

“Awaits you,” Charles reminded her.

Aerith spent the next thirty seconds laughing uproariously, the most fake sounding, knee slappingist, loudest fake laugh she could muster.

“Are you finished?”

“Maybe. Once again, can you step out of your portrait and stop Professor Fig from joining me?”

“No, I can’t, but-”

“Then shut up, and tell me where the arch is. This trial of yours is pointless, we have already discussed this, so let’s just get it over with.”

“I am once again beginning to doubt working with someone so rude.”

Aerith took a deep breath. “My courtesy or lack thereof towards a painting of a man long dead, that is making me jump through a bunch of hoops like a circus animal to erase the stains of a mistake he made hundreds of years ago but refuses to share with me, does not erase the fact I can use this magic

you're all so afraid of. You clearly made terrible choices. We, here in the present, must now correct them. I am the only one who can. Now, before the goblins find whatever it was you were so terrified of you had to bury it, the archway, please."

Charles considered her. "Fine, I suppose we have no choice. The way has been hidden even from your sight. Simply focus your magic directly away from me, right at the edge of that rug, one of the only things you haven't stolen from here. Say the words "let the path be opened" and the wellspring should be revealed."

"I'm not stealing that rug. Even magic couldn't get that awful looking thing clean at this point." She walked to the place he indicated and focused, saying the 'magic words,' and the usual shimmer of magic appeared. She absorbed it as usual, making the archway to another place appear before her. "Thank you ever so much," she 'thanked' him, dripping with sarcasm. "Let's go."

The two stepped through into the usual ostentatious hallway and another door, which they easily pushed open and stepped through. Here again was a huge hallway leading to another doorway, further proving Percival really, really liked doorways for some reason. *Some kind of symbolism?* As before every inch was covered in shimmering material like marble, the twisted columns to either side shining, shimmering, splendid in the light of their lumos spells. But then an even *grander* room opened before them, this one with a blue theme, decorative pillars holding up the ceiling that was at least fifty meters above them. Two columns of pure marble rose from a shimmering circle of glass below, sparkling as they got closer. At either side were cubbies full of scrolls, which were beyond artwork with a dragon theme set on massive pedestals. The walls were polished to a mirror like shine even now, and a huge silver shape with a ball of light hung from the ceiling, too high to even see how it attached up there.

"My God I hate these people!" Aerith huffed, taking it all in. "Are you seeing all this?"

"It does seem a bit excessive," Professor Fig agreed. "I mean I realize it really didn't cost them anything but time, having been made entirely by magic, but this place is the throne room of an emperor. Not even the pharaohs of old could claim such an... obscene room. It's staggering, but for what purpose I can't imagine."

"To show what I can do, one day? But they don't want me flaunting this magic- maybe that's why right there. Because no one but me would ever see it, so he finally felt he could go all out. Finally use his magic, not in the way it was meant to be used, but at least to get some use from it."

"Restoring the valley, I take it, is what you're referring to?"

"Exactly. I would rather have one well constructed dome protecting the beasts of the forest than a hundred of these gaudy rooms no one will ever see. Let's check the stairs, I don't see a door here."

"Right. And so the trial begins."

## Chapter 34

Workarounds

When: Saturday morning

Where: Trial 2, unknown location

The stairs, situated on the right side of the room and going up one flight led to a balcony stretching across half the room. Then there was a protective railing, wouldn't want anyone getting hurt in here now would we? A gap, and what was seemingly a blank wall. There was no way out of this chamber at the moment, but with all the space bending Percival loved she was sure there would be soon. To this end Aerith found another wellspring of magic which she happily absorbed at the end of the walkway. This showed the passageway was not a dead end, and continued on.

"But how do we get over there?" Professor Fig wondered. "Brooms?"

"That's one way," she admitted. "I still have the ladder I acquired from the castle, we could use that. It's strange, isn't it? This side has this nice railing so we don't fall off, but the other side does not."

"Say we didn't have a ladder, or carried brooms into this place, what would we have done?"

"Let's look around, maybe something changed below?"

And it had. There was a strange looking box under the walkway which Aerith floated over to the middle, then cast Levioso on. While it was floating she managed to climb up it, then stand on it and jump up to the ledge, which she pulled herself up to. It seemed made for this, as it had a decorative design around the outside that was easy to hold on to. This made standing on it a bit tricky, but she didn't have to do it for long. "Easy," she called down to Professor Fig. "You can do it!"

"I'm too old for this," he mused, making Aerith cancel her levioso spell, allowing him to climb on the box. She then just levitated it again and helped him with a steadying hand. "Really," he complained. "All this jumping about. What if someone my age had come to do these trials alone?"

"Don't look at me, I didn't make them. Let's go."

"Wait, did something happen?" He pointed back to the two columns, there was a strange light now shimmering between them.

"Who knows," Aerith told him. "Let's just go."

The second room had a strange floor that moved around as they walked on it, making Aerith 'tisk' over the waste of it all and wonder why he had bothered, and walked to the end of the room. A large pillar blocked their way to the next one.

"I bet my magic is strong enough to move it!" she told him, face lit up at the prospect.

"Don't bother," he told her. "Look, there's enough room for us to just slip through the space between the pillar and the doorway."

"I guess. You're not that fat."

"Right, exactly- wait what do you mean 'that' fat?"

"Never mind, I'll go first." The two climbed past the pillar part and squeezed past the metal part, landing neatly in the next room.

"Is he even trying?" she asked, looking back at it. "Maybe he left that there by accident?"

"Does seem a bit odd."

Past that room was a ‘let’s fight some stupid statue things’ room, with a large statue in the middle of a platform with no safety railings here. Aerith and Professor Fig checked both sides but didn’t see any mechanism this time to turn it off. Both of them went invisible and Aerith touched the platform area with one toe. As expected, four more statue things fell from nowhere and started looking around for them. The pair snuck by, staying behind the columns that were set up there, and coming around behind them. The first pair fell to Petrificus Totalus quite easily, and the others didn’t seem to notice. So they went over to the other side and did it again. Still no reaction from the big one. So they did it to him too, and moved on.

“They’re kind of stupid,” Aerith remarked, updating her latest ‘return point’ which of course she had been doing all along without the author having to note down each and every single time right?

“Just be glad of that, even we could get knocked off that edge and have a bad time of it.”

“True.”

The next room was again grand, with literal waterfalls and greenery and light and that weird lamp thing hung from high above.

“Such a waste!” Aerith muttered.

They walked forward to a circular area and saw a dead end to the right, a shimmering curtain of light leading to nothing before them, and a door far to the left. The right side ended with a huge stone statue of the same type they had been fighting, a person in armor. *Who was this person they made so many statues and living statues of?* They went away from that but were stymied by the lack of any solid ground between the current path and the path in front of the door. Again, Aerith thought of brooms, but Professor Fig was sticking his head through the archway.

“Come and have a look at this,” he called to her. She stuck her head through and looked left, eyes narrowing. There was a platform there, joining the two halves of the path together.

“Okay, how did he do that?” she asked. “That’s not just opening to another location.”

“Good question.” He looked down. “There is enough ground to stand on if we go through.”

“Hug the edge here? Don’t fall off?”

“That seems to be the case.”

“Fine, but I’m keeping a broom on standby if someone falls.”

“Someone being me?”

“I’m a thief remember?”

He paused. “I don’t follow.”

“Sticky fingers.” She showed him her hands.

“Ha ha, very funny. Go on.”

She got her broom out and while it was tricky holding it in one hand and getting through the doorway, she carefully went around the edge, climbed over the railing, and watched as Professor Fig did the same. She put the broom away and both hastened to the other side in case this effect was temporary.

Another insanely large chamber was next, again making Aerith wonder where exactly all this was happening, and how Percival had found so many huge underground caverns to make this all in. They had to deal with two more soldiers, sneaking behind one and then making their way to the other. But both stopped and stared as the second soldier, clearly having heard the first crashing to the ground, repeatedly got nowhere trying to get to them. It was stuck behind one of the decorative columns that pervaded the place and didn’t seem to know it was there. It just kept smacking into the thing, staggering back a few steps, and repeating the procedure. Over. And over. And over. The pair left the sad thing to its fate, seemingly content to bump into the column for all eternity.

They came to a room with more golden plates featuring that snake motif, Percival must have loved him some snakes, but Aerith paused picking it up.

“This can’t be gold, can it?” she asked. “Even my magic couldn’t... You don’t think?”

"I... Huh. We have run into a lot of these things, haven't we? And they are pretty heavy. But even intuitive magic must have limits. Right?"

"A magic that can bend space, create all this in the blink of an eye, make stupid statue things that attack people and last forever but *can't* make a bit of gold? Somewhat arbitrary, right?"

"Maybe try that when we get back?"

"No you think?" She booked it anyway, along with a nearby "egg" that was half her size and again featured a serpent of some kind.

The pair went up some stairs, a rather grand staircase not that she expected anything less at this point, and saw another of those huge treasure chests before a closed door. Not expecting much, she congratulated herself on her foresight as getting the lid off resulted in a few healing potions.

"Did you ever try those we found last time?" he asked.

"No, I threw them away. They were hundreds of years old, I wasn't going to trust them!"

"Probably for the best."

They left them.

Another "arena" awaited them, this time with an archway in the center. They again checked the sides, and were fortunate enough to find another mechanism they could trigger. No stone statues attacked them, and they went through the archway to find a room dominated by a huge stone figure. It towered over both of them, just the thing's head being taller than Aerith, and there was the pensieve under it. As they walked towards it shining liquid dripped from one of the eyes into it.

"Oh, spare me," said Aerith to the thing, looking up at it. "Tears? Really? He was such a drama queen. Couldn't just have another vial, no not our Percival. Pageantry, that's the name of the game here. How did any of this trial prove my suitability for this magic again? And what if I wasn't? Would the trial have ended any differently? No? Okay then. Good talk."

"You feeling all right?"

*No. I watched a man get ripped to shreds, then I made a guy get eaten by spiders because he killed his elf because he was a moron. I didn't want any of this, you know. "Just peachy. A wakka wakka do do yeah!"*

"I'm sorry?"

"Just a bit of Gibberish I learned in class. Come on, let's go."

The two put their heads into the birdbath, so efficient, and were transported to the land of remembering. Isidora was now apparently a Hogwarts professor, something Aerith already knew from traipsing about the land with Sebastian, wearing a green dress that would have been quite scandalous even if Aerith's time were it not for that dark lace across the front. *But take that away, pair it with a short skirt, oh there's some possibilities there. Wow, how can you be so covered and yet, so not covered at the same time? I'll have to see what Mr. Hill can come up with.* They accepted her invitation to come to her home, the scene switching to the four approaching the house with the well. *Huh, she looks years older but the others don't. Maybe once you get old and wrinkled you get older looking slower than when you were younger? Ugh, I'm going to be old one day. Wonder if I could make myself some kind of crystal that could make me immortal? Focus, they're through the door!* The four sat, and Isidora called her father into the room. He shambled in like a zombie. *Uh, she was traveling, right? Who was taking care of good old dad when she was away? This guy wasn't taking care of himself, that's for sure. Has he been like this since she was a little girl? And no one did anything? At all? Oh dear...* She picked up her wand and a glass jar, and her father sat down at her urging.

"Father hasn't spoken since my brother died," she was explaining. "On my travels, I confirmed that which I've always believed. That we have the power to take away pain."

*Shouldn't that be 'in my travels?' But go on. Wait, how did she learn anything 'on her travels' when only two people in the world can currently use this type of magic? It's not like she read books about it, or talked to other masters.*

She took the chair next to her father, he seemingly didn't care. Looking past them (because this scene was fairly boring, get to the point already) she wondered who cut all that wood for the fireplace if she had just gotten back. *In fact, I've seen candles and torches burning for what must be hundreds of years, there must be charms to make fire not consume the fuel it's burning. Why wouldn't a wizard just do that, instead of- oh something's happening!*

She used a strange grip on her wand, but it wasn't lost on Aerith their wands were very similar. Twisted branches, forming a stronger whole. She didn't have a wand decoration and strap like Aerith, but it was undoubtedly a similar design. She tapped it against his chest and shimmering strands stuck to it as she pulled it away. Her father was, uh, reacting, to that, which would have made Aerith's cheeks turn red if she had any, and finally she held up the wand, blobs of black energy clinging to it. The others just sort of sat there.

"What have you done?" Percival asked her.

*Uh, maybe cured her father?*

"I took his pain," she explained, dropping the blobs into the glass jar, leaving her wand free.

"This is uncharted magic, Isidora," he went on.

*Uh, yeah, so was the first spell cast by the first wizard with the first wand. That's how it works. That's how progress works. The first light bulb. The first electric car. The first wheel for crying out loud. Someone has to go first!*

"You can only see what has been sealed in the jar- and we do not know what power that may hold. But the traces of that magic are different from what I've seen before."

*What's he going on about now? Power? It's this guy's pain. It's not power. It's his grief for his lost son. The 'power' was in Isidora, to work the spell. It's gone, the spell is ended. But no, I get it. It's 'different' so it must be bad. Of course.*

Meanwhile Isidora was smiling at her father, who looked to be coming around, so to speak. "Thank you," he said.

*Ah, see? Success! And you're going to tell me this is somehow bad, aren't you, Percival?*

The two returned to the chamber, the two paintings looking nervous and resigned at the same time.

"So she went behind your back and experimented in ways to cure her father. And when the time came, it seems she managed it. I didn't see much after that but I'm guessing there were not hearty congratulations offered and the opening of a new branch of medicine?"

"No," Percival agreed. "What she did was reckless, and out of line. Who knows what could have happened?"

"Presumably, her. I doubt she would have done something dangerous to her own father. But that's almost beside the point. All medical procedures have to be done a first time. And no one is going to be able to tell what the outcome is. Maybe the patient dies. Maybe they die from complications or something unrelated. So you try again and hope for better results. Soon enough you have a working procedure that everyone can use to treat some kind of illness. Spells are the same way. The first time someone cast a levitation charm, they didn't know exactly what would happen. The risk was hers to take."

"But she was playing around with human emotions!"

"To help someone. Not to take their joy of living away, or anything like that. Her father spoke. He looked relieved. How was this outcome bad?"

"You will see this in later memories, I will not reveal it now."

“Okay, sure, but you couldn’t have known that at the time. Did you say, ‘very well Isidora you have proven your technique works let us observe this man and chart his recovery. Let us find more hopeless cases and see if this outcome can be repeated in a lab environment. Let us find others to use as a control and see if normal medication helps them as much as this method.’ I’m guessing no.”

“We did not.”

“Of course. So she didn’t stop, because she wanted to prove herself to you, because all she craved was a little recognition for her work that you would never, in the end, give. But let’s change tracks here. That glass jar, wasn’t it a bit dangerous to keep those emotions in there? What if it fell on the floor and shattered? Would those emotions now go into the nearest person? Go back into her father?”

“We didn’t do something so reckless as test that,” he told her.

*So it could have been either. For all I know it might grow in that jar and be even worse once it went back into someone. That’s a terrifying thought.*

“It’s not as bad as all that,” Professor Fig clarified. “Magic can make glass near unbreakable. I can only assume she did that to the jar.”

“I wonder. Bad idea, if so. Who knows how that magic would have reacted with the emotion but at the same time it didn’t seem aware. Didn’t seem to be trying to get into someone. So I suppose that would have been adequate. What about magic to keep the jar sealed once the top was put on?”

“No magic like that. I suppose a sticking charm on the lid and then screw it down?”

“I wasn’t watching closely enough to see if she did that. So it could have gotten out that way.”

“I suppose.”

“Forget the jars, or it getting loose, she took care of that later anyway,” Percival chided her. “What she did was wrong, can I at least hear you say that much?”

“Ah!” Aerith’s eyes lit up. “So she did keep doing it. How much of that negative emotion did she manage to collect, in the end?”

“Quite a bit,” he finally decided to say.

*And she would need a place to put it all. And who do we know can make sturdy things, possibly big enough to hold all the emotions she knew she would probably eventually have? Goblins, that’s who. She had a goblin build some kind of container which Ranrok now wants back for some reason, and all the pain she took from people is now inside it. That’s the connection to goblins that’s been missing. We know what they’re searching for, that container made hundreds of years ago! The question is why? He can’t possibly want all those negative- She blinked as she came out of the memory. To unleash against us! If he could find a way to weaponize those negative emotions, give them to people in the blink of an eye, why he could make a man without kids suddenly feel the grief of having lost a son. It would debilitate him, maybe not for long, but long enough to get his wand away from him I bet. Wait, is Professor Fig-*

“So,” Professor Fig said, not taking his eyes off her. “We have a pretty good idea of what happened now, I think.”

“I agree.”

“This intuitive magic,” he went on carefully, “it seems it can do more than just fold space and make caverns look nice.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to start yanking people’s pain away, if that’s even what she was doing. For all I know she was fooling herself. We didn’t get to see her father a week from that point, or a month. For all I know he died the next day from the shock.” *I would be tempted to use it on Anne, but that’s a physical pain, not the emotional pain her father was undergoing. Completely different.*

“That’s good to hear. Still, this is another example of how incredible your magic is. I wonder what else it can do?”

“It’s probably only limited by my imagination. Hard to say, I’ve only used it to make the sanctuary and the doors.”

“Well, perhaps hold off on any more experiments for now? Especially casting magic on people.”

“I didn’t plan to.”

*He’s looking at me like I’m dangerous. But I’m no more dangerous now- okay that’s not true. If this magic does rely on me just feeling out what I want it to do, and I get a new idea for something to try I wouldn’t have had myself, that does make me more dangerous. But that was Isidora’s thing, ‘taking away pain.’ I just want to protect. She had her circumstances, I have mine. Anything that leaves a ‘byproduct’ around is probably not the best thing to be doing. Strange that the emotion didn’t just vanish, I mean why was it that yucky black oil looking stuff? Very odd, is that really ‘inside’ me right now, like if I’m sad about something is my body making black gunk I can simply express and not be sad anymore? So weird to think about.*

“So we know what they’re digging for,” she announced. “You could have just told me. Did you think I wouldn’t have believed you, or something?”

“I suppose it is obvious, seeing what you’ve seen.” Percival admitted.

“It is. The goblins want what they made back. We have to make sure they can’t use those negative emotions against us. Where is it? If we can move it from underground they can dig up the landscape all they want and never find it.”

“It’s not so easy, you have to get the key first,” Charles reminded her.

“So where is the third ‘trial?’”

“I think I can help with that,” said another voice, and the woman the two had just seen stepped into view. “Former headmistress, Niamh Fitzgerald, at your service,” she said.

## Chapter 35

Fishy

When: Sunday morning

Where: Breakfast

Aerith was sitting at the breakfast table the next day, stewing over the newest thorn in her side. And there was still a painting left that was currently unoccupied, so she was pretty sure one more would be making itself known soon. The newest figure in the paintings, Niamh Fitzgerald, had been as frustrating to talk to as the other two. She insisted she needed to “prepare the way” and they couldn’t just leave for the third trial at once. Nor would she explain what that meant, as Aerith reminded her in no uncertain terms *she was a painting*, and thus, could not affect the world in really any way. Niamh insisted it was all taken care of, and the two left the map chamber. They simply had to wait, meanwhile Ranrok and his digging machines could be creeping up on whatever they had buried at this very moment. It was quite frustrating.

She heard two people swiftly approaching and looked up, seeing a Slytherin girl being dragged by Nerida in her direction.

“Hi Aerith!” she bubbled, clearly too peppy for a Sunday morning as she bouncing on the balls of her feet like she couldn’t be still. “This is Grace.”

“Hello,” said Grace. “Sorry about her, I said it wasn’t worth bothering you but-”

“Don’t be silly! Are you busy today? Doing anything important? No? Great! Grace needs our help. Go on, tell her Grace, you’re going to love this Aerith. Go on, tell her!”

“I will if you let me. Sheesh take a breath.”

“Take a breath, that’s a good one!”

Grace looked at her like she had gone crazy.

“You know, because of the thing? You know?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, very clever.” She turned back to Aerith. “Anyway, the thing is-”

“She needs our help with something related to *swimming!*” Nerida burst out. “Get it!?”

“Do you want to tell her or I can get on with it?”

“Sorry, sorry, I couldn’t- I’ll let her talk. Swimming, Aerith!”

Aerith couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yes, I heard you. Go on, Grace.”

“I do need the help of someone that can swim fairly well. My father has forbidden me to go into the lake because of what it took from us, but there’s something I’d like back. I should start at the beginning.”

Grace told her about how her grandparents had taken a short boat ride to do some star-gazing but never returned. An investigation had of course been launched, to make sure they hadn’t just skipped town to avoid debts, get away from a family squabble, that sort of thing. The family’s only conclusion then was that they had sunk and drown.

“On the Black Lake?” Aerith pressed.

“Yes. That one. By the school.”

“But it’s not that wide,” she protested. “You could easily swim across it! And they were magic users, presumably?”

“Of course,” Grace sniffed.

“And you’re sure they didn’t just leave?”

“That’s what I was told.”

“So you want to learn the truth, and see if their boat really is there.”

“Not exactly. Oh, what I want will prove that one way or the other, yes, but I want to retrieve something from the wreck. It’s no doubt rusted beyond recognition but hopefully there is magic to help undo that.”

“It must be quite valuable to go through the trouble.”

“It’s an astrolabe. So no, not so much. But it had been in our family a long time so it does have sentimental value. It would mean a lot to my father if it could be returned.”

“I mean, sure, I’m sure it would. But even though I said it wasn’t that wide, trying to find a single small boat down there isn’t really practical.”

“That’s where I come in!” Nerida announced, raising a hand. “Tada! I can ask the merpeople that live in the lake if they’ve seen any shipwrecks! They can also carry us down to look for the thing. I have no idea what the mermish word for ‘astrolabe’ is so we’ll just have to go down and look around. What do you think? Will you help?” Nerida was practically glowing at this point, a huge smile on her face and had her hands clasped in front of her. *How can I say no to that face?* “Sure, I’ll help.”

“Yes!” she pumped a fist. “Now it’s an adventure!”

*Oh wow, she really has no idea, does she? Sneak past a bunch of angry goblins, that’s an adventure. This is just going for a swim.*

“Thank you,” Grace said graciously. “It really does mean a lot to me.”

“Sure. I’ve only had a light breakfast, we leaving now?”

Nerida nodded fiercely.

“Let’s go. But remember, I can only cover one of you with my pass outside the castle. We get caught and one of you has to fall on their sword for breaking the rules.”

“I will,” Grace told them. “It’s my request, so the blame is mine.”

“Just so long as you know.”

The three flew to a small island in the lake so they could disrobe properly, which Nerida couldn’t do quickly enough it seemed. Naturally they had gotten an exact description of the item they were hunting, basically a big brass globe with various “arms” enfolding it.

“Wait, I thought you were wearing a bathing costume under your robes or something?” Grace protested. “I had no idea what you were going to do Aerith but this?”

“It’s fine, you should try it!” Nerida told her. “We’re far enough away, no one can see us and we’ll be in the water most of the time anyway.”

“How are we calling the merfolk anyway?” Aerith asked, pausing as she slipped her skirt off.

“Oh right, almost forgot.” Nerida reached into a pocket and brought out what looked like a white shell. She wound up and threw it as far into the water as she could. “It’s magical, somehow,” she told the others to their questionable looks. “They gave it to me to call them if I needed them. It won’t take long.”

“Huh,” was Grace’s only reply.

And it didn’t take long, as a few heads popped up out of the water and started looking around. Nerida waved them over, and they returned the shell. She then had an animated discussion with them, introducing her two companions and explaining what she wanted. Meanwhile Aerith looked them over. They had “hair” of a sort, which was more like tentacles as it was very thick, which was to be expected. *Imagine having hair like ours, but living underwater. It just wouldn’t work.* Their faces were somewhat human, though their teeth were pointed and they had much bigger mouths and eyes than humans. *Sure, to see better in the darkness of the water.* Some wore “jewelry” of a sort, shells and the like as necklaces, and of course all were unclothed. Their skin was gray, like a dolphin, which again made sense. Most non-fishy sort of lifeforms that lived in water had gray skin. *So not exactly like the pictures would have you believe.* Suddenly the majority of them scattered, leaving only two.

“They’ve agreed to help us!” Nerida announced. “Some are going to head to known wrecks, so we can get an accurate location beforehand. These two have agreed to ‘ferry’ us, if you will, to the sites. Aerith, this is,” and she made some (hopefully approximate) sounds that must be her name. She waved, and Aerith gave a slight bow. “Yeah, that’s not going to work, I can’t really translate her name into English. Well, anyway, you can’t talk to her so whatever. Now, obviously, they know we breathe air. But they swim best underwater. What to do? Don’t worry, I’ve worked something out. Hang on to her, and when you need to breathe just tap her. I’ve, uh,” she blushed, “actually swam with them before so it works out just fine. Naturally they’ll come up before any deep dive to the ship. When you’re ready to dive again just tap again. I think that’s about it. Oh, and stay as close to them as you can, they won’t mind believe me. If you don’t it’ll really drag their speed down and we won’t get anywhere. Any questions?”

“I guess not,” Aerith told her, triggering another return point to this spot, just in case. “Let’s go treasure hunting.”

“Yes!” Nerida jumped in the water excitedly, but Aerith turned to Grace.

“See you soon. Hopefully with the astrolabe.”

“Good luck!”

Aerith plowed into the water and the mermaid offered her back. She followed Nerida’s example, pulling close to her back and putting her arms around her. They were off. Taking a deep breath Aerith tapped, and the mermaid dove, surprising Aerith with her strength. The water was flowing past them, she had to turn her head and squint the pressure was so great. She could feel the power in her lower body, and it seemed she was actually more fish part than human part. Her tail extended far past Aerith’s puny legs, so they were really moving. She tried to relax and let the mermaid do all the work, and enjoy the ride. After a few breaths Aerith decided she really was holding the mermaid back and tried to squish closer to her, mirroring her movements herself. She of course didn’t have a segmented tail like a cat only her frail, jointed human leg parts but the two figured out how to move together and the mermaid looked back at her, with what was probably supposed to be a reassuring smile but it had way too many teeth in it. *Still, no wonder dolphins are such playful creatures, moving like this is fun! I can’t believe how powerful she is.*

It turned out there were more than a few wrecks in the area, but the lake wasn’t *that* deep. At least, not when Aerith had only to hold on as her partner did all the work. She could then spend a bit of time checking the wreck, and be assured her partner could whisk her back to the surface in only seconds. Nerida really looked to be having fun, pointing out underwater life and parts of the wrecks, which was quite infectious. It came to an end four wrecks in as she swam out of the lower part holding a metal ball triumphantly. Aerith actually felt a bit of disappointment. *I guess that’s it. No more swimming for us. And it seems her grandparents really did perish on this lake. Or at least, we are meant to think they did. The boat sank, without further investigation to find their bodies that’s all we really know. But best to let sleeping fishes lie, so to speak.*

After making their way back and showing Grace what they had found, a brass sphere coated with green corrosion and barnacles, she said that was it. They had done it, they had found the astrolabe! Nerida thanked the merpeople profusely, and both Aerith and Grace bowed to them and thanked them as they were able. The merpeople seemed pleased with how everything had turned out, and with a final splash they were gone.

“Wasn’t that incredible?” Nerida asked Aerith.

“I have to admit, it left me breathless.”

“Oh? Could you even *fathom* how strong they were?”

“They’re definitely without peer.”

“They can really make waves.”

“Could we go again or would that make them crabby?”

“It was like shooting fish in a barrel!” Grace put in, not to be left out.

Nerida winked at Aerith and got a horrified look on her face. She mirrored it and the girls turned to Grace.

“How could you say something like that?” she gasped. “Fish... In a barrel?”

“Give me that back, I’m chucking it back in,” Aerith told her. “I can’t believe I did a favor for someone like this.”

She pulled it away. “What? What did I say? I’m sorry, was that-”

But Nerida couldn’t take it and burst out laughing.

“You jerk!” Grace told her, slapping her arm. “You really had me going.”

“For real though, that was pretty great,” Aerith told her, flopping down on the sand. “But you knew that before you could swim with them, unless that was a lie?”

“You saw the thrashing around I did when I was taking your lessons,” Nerida reminded her.

“True, true,” she agreed, remembering those memories with fondness. “You’ve really improved. I see why, if you get to swim like that.”

“I feel like I’m missing out,” Grace told them.

“You are,” Nerida told her. “Imagine flying, but you’re not sitting on a broomstick well I mean you must have gone swimming somewhere before?”

“Of course!”

“Well, it’s like that, just ten times better. My heart beats so fast!”

“That’s probably the lack of oxygen though?”

“Only in part. Well, guess I have to put my clothes back on.”

Now back the castle Aerith and her friends went over all the crates and books and sacks the second trial had yielded, she then boxed up what she didn’t want and unloaded it onto Mr. Pinkfeather. She kept one of the globes, not the dragon one despite how much she wanted it. She wanted gold more, and that one looked to be worth a lot. Beautiful, shining, golden coins. She also carved a hole in reality to get back to the trial castle, quietly making sure no one was down there so her friends could strip the library there to the bare shelves. They also tried freeing the machine, but even Aerith’s magic was not mighty enough to liberate it. At least, not quietly enough for her tastes because she didn’t want anyone to come running. *Also if we did get it out of there someone might be back and wonder just exactly how that had been accomplished. I could maybe make a door big enough to float it through but so far I’ve only made small ones. I wonder if I could learn a shrinking things spell, then we wouldn’t have to move it at all. Just shrink it and carry it out of here.*

Now at lunch she saw another familiar figure heading her way, trailed by a boy holding his wand out in front of him.

“Sebastian, Ominis, how are you?” she greeted them.

They both said they were fine, and sat down across from her.

“How would you like to go on a bit of an adventure?” Sebastian asked her.

“Two in one day? How can I cope?” she joked.

“What was the first?”

“Oh, a bit of nudity, meeting some merpeople, helping another Slytherin out, honestly it’s like you Slytherins can’t solve your own problems. You need us Ravenclaws to do it.” *Never noticed until just now. Most of the people I’ve helped in this school are Slytherin house. Huh.*

“Wait, describe this nudity in greater detail,” Ominis requested.

“Well first I removed my robe-”

“That can wait,” Sebastian decided. “Ominis here has just finished telling me about a secret room in the castle!”

“Wait, another one?” Aerith despaired. “I swear, this place is more secret rooms by volume than actual rooms. Well, technically it would go stairs then secret rooms then hallways then classrooms then dorm rooms and then bathrooms. It should be other way around!”

“Agreed,” Ominis admitted. “I don’t know how you girls do it, but morning in the Slytherin dorm are cutthroat. You show weakness for even a second and...” He drew a line across his throat with a finger.

“Back to the topic at hand, want to help me find it?”

“I mean I guess...” she looked at Ominis who was shaking his head. “Or not? What are you not telling me?”

“This secret room belonged to Salazar himself!” Sebastian announced proudly.

“And thus, is probably related to dark magic,” Ominis told them. “Which, *as Sebastian knows* I want nothing to do with. So even if you can convince me to show you, which you haven’t yet, Sebastian, I’m not setting a foot inside it.”

“Look, Anne is better,” he admitted. “But she’s still in pain sometimes. I haven’t given up on completely curing her. How can I, and still be a good brother? If there’s something about curses in this school it’s in the restricted section, or a secret room owned by a Hogwarts founder. You want to help Anne, don’t you Aerith?”

*Oh no, you’re not using the old guilt trip here me old son.* “I did help her,” she protested. “She’s now back at school, rolling around just fine in her chair, and everyone is being nice to her and helping her out. She’s sleeping better, learning to manage her pain, and moving on. This is her life now, Sebastian.”

“Thank you,” Ominis breathed. “Another voice of reason.”

“But if her life could be *better*-”

“Sebastian, stop. Listen to me for a second, okay? Dark magic isn’t the answer in this case. Let me give you an example, okay?”

“You’re not going to convince me but go ahead.”

“To pick a recent happening, say your house is on fire.”

“Oh, I heard about a house burning down and the rumor was they couldn’t put the fire out until the whole place was ash,” Ominis told them. “Some guy that made potions, no one really liked him. Didn’t find any body, they presume he was lost to the fire.”

“Or maybe he just happened to find himself in a cave full of spiders?”

“Strangely specific,” Sebastian said softly.

“No comment. The point is, do you put the house fire out by trying a water making spell, or a fire making spell?”

“Water, of course.”

“Then you see my point. Dark magic is called that *for a reason*. Otherwise it would be called healing magic. Dark magic casters have no intention of lifting curses, or undoing the harm they have done. I mean think about the unforgivable curses. Everyone calls them dark magic but really, they’re just spells. The magic isn’t evil, just used in a certain way like every other spell. We classify it that way. So why would books on ‘dark magic’ have any references to cures or curse breaking? It’s fighting fire with fire, Sebastian. You have to look elsewhere.”

“But if we could understand it...”

“What difference would it make?” she countered. “The spell is cast. It’s done. Over. Otherwise you could just use a spell that ends other spells. We talked about that in class, remember? Something was done to her body. If trained healers can’t undo it, then it can’t be undone. Maybe it’s too risky, or maybe we just don’t know enough about the body to heal those scars she now carries. But black magic, magic by definition created to cause pain, to hurt, to curse, is not the answer. Maybe look into a healing ritual? It would be slow, maybe you would have to do it multiple times, but that would be my best

hope. You want to do something like that, I'm right there with you. I've seen ritual magic work and do something wand magic couldn't. That's where you should focus your efforts."

"Fine," he allowed, standing again. "I see how it is. Maybe I will. Thanks."

"Thank you," Ominis told her sincerely. "If I know him he won't let this go, but at least you're not in danger."

"Let me know if he tries anything stupid."

"I will. Goodbye for now."

## Chapter 36

Missing Persons

When: Monday afternoon

Where: Lunch

Aerith was reflecting on all that happened in the three weeks since she had come to the school. The people she had met, the lessons she had taken. The people she had helped. The secret rooms she had discovered. And apparently there were more that she had yet to find, if what Ominis had said was true. *And speaking of Ominis...*

“Aerith, there you are,” Ominis said, rushing up to her.

“Hey there,” she greeted him. “Have a seat. Where’s Sebastian today, anyway? I don’t recall seeing him in class this morning. You two are usually together.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” he admitted. “I feel something terrible has happened, and it’s all my fault.”

“You didn’t!”

“I must reluctantly admit it did. It was a moment of weakness, but he just would not shut up about it.”

“You told him how to get into the secret room,” she said in a flat voice. “And in he went.”

“Yes. And he didn’t return last night. Or this morning. I can’t exactly go to a teacher about this...”

“That’s exactly the thing you should do. But I suppose you would get in trouble as well.” *For telling him about it. Honestly, how many secret rooms can one castle have?*

“Exactly. I can’t afford that.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “There’s a bit of time before afternoon classes, let’s go rescue whatever remains of him.” She got up out of her seat.

“Don’t say things like that!”

“Let me go grab a bag so I have something to put the head into.” *Could I suck it into the nab-sack? Or is that animals only?*

“Aerith!”

“Okay, fine, I’ll just float it. Where are we headed anyway?”

“This way.”

The two started to leave when Professor Weasley stepped up to the podium and called for quiet. “Quiet please, everyone. I have an announcement. A student seems to be missing, if anyone knows the whereabouts of...”

*Sebastian Sallow, we know. He’ll be back-*

“Archie Bickle, please come and tell me right away.”

*-soon enough. Wait what?*

“He’s been missing since late Friday, anyone with any information on where he might have gone, please come forward.”

No one did.

“Spread the word, my office is always open,” she finished after waiting a moment. “That is all.”

“You don’t think...” Aerith trailed off.

“Even he wouldn’t go that far. Would he? No. But we have to find him. Come on, this way.”

The pair walked through the castle until they came to a fairly ordinary hallway.

"You have to light the three braziers, then the doorway will open," Ominis told her.

"Uh, okay?" She looked at where he was pointing and yes, there were three tall, metal things she could cast into. "But that's the worst hiding spot ever. These must be lit all the time in the winter."

"Maybe it has something to do with intent? I have no idea."

"Very well, we're alone down here anyway." She cast three times, sending fire into the bowls and what did you know, the wall right there opened up and led into darkness. "Hey, it worked!"

"I know it worked. I told Sebastian how to do it and he went in there. He hasn't come out yet. Please go and get him."

"You're not coming in?"

"I told him I wouldn't. I know now I should have stuck to my guns and not told him in the first place."

"But you'll send me, a person he's known less than a month, after him?"

He sighed. "Honestly, you're really the only other person he talks to, apart from me and Anne. Why do you think he took Anne's condition so seriously? I can't imagine what he would have gone through if she had actually died. Honestly I don't know why she didn't. Anyone that can do that to a person probably knows the killing curse."

"Didn't he say goblins did it?"

"He would like that to be true, yes. It allows him to further hate a whole group without having to feel guilty about it. But he really has no evidence of it, Anne said she didn't see her attacker so it could have been anyone."

"Huh. You're pretty perceptive, aren't you Ominis?"

"Strange how that worked out, isn't it?" He pointed to his eyes. "Now get going before someone comes down this hallway."

"Very well, wish me luck."

"Of course."

Wand lit, Aerith walked through the opening in the wall into the secret passage, trying not to sneeze from all the dust she was stirring up. She didn't have far to go until she came to a perfectly intact door with a lot of snakes all over it. *Someone really like snakes. Like, a lot.* She then poked her head through the gaping hole that seemed to have been blown in the stone wall beside it. *That's one way to get through a place.* She proceeded. *At least the torches are still lit. I should learn that spell, to make fire that never goes out. Can you set a person on fire that way? Huh, dark thought for a dark place, I suppose.* She had to solve a minor puzzle, the work of moments for a Ravenclaw like herself, and each time she passed through a gate it closed behind her. *Was there one he couldn't solve?* She came to a door that looked very strange, that had a skeleton in front of it. *Well that's not him, he's only been missing a few hours. But no holes, where could he-* She turned around and saw a figure as far away from the door as he could be but still be in this room. She hadn't noticed him in the gloom and the fact he was wearing a dark robe and appeared to have had his head between his knees. "Oh, you're alive!"

Aerith had indeed come upon the defeated form of Sebastian, sitting on the floor in the corner. He looked up in surprise.

"You came for me!" he exclaimed, scrambling up. "Did Ominis fetch you?"

"Who? No, I often find myself wandering around secret rooms in the castle at random- of course he told me. What were you thinking, Sebastian!?"

"No need to be snippy about it. Look, I think I know how to proceed but it'll be a sacrifice on one of our parts. Let's do it and get out of here."

"What's that?" She pointed at the small stack of parchments by his side.

“Notes from Ominis’ aunt, if you can believe it. That’s her there, by the way.” He indicated the skeleton. “She had the same problem I did, can’t blast through here you have to solve it the ‘right’ way.”

“I know I’m going to regret asking, but what is the ‘right’ way, anyway?” She looked the door over. It didn’t look like either metal or stone, and the imagery protruding from it, as though many people were trying to pass through it in a molten state and got stuck, agony on their faces, was quite horrific.

“Casting the cruciatus curse on someone.”

“What? How would a door know that a spell was cast on someone? Do you really think there’s a ‘detect curse’ charm put on the door, that triggers some kind of ‘open creepy door’ charm? Come on Sebastian.”

“I’m telling you, I’m right.”

“We’ll never know. Come on, we’re getting out of here.”

“But we’re so close!”

“And yet, so far away,” she continued. She picked up the pages, stuck them into her book, and for good measure tried touching the skeleton to it as well. As it was “the skeleton of Ominis’ aunt” and not “a pile of bones or whatever” the entire thing went into the book in one piece. “Good,” she decided with a nod. “I can get them out when we have a grave dug. She won’t have to rot in this corridor any longer. Poor woman.” She looked around, nothing in this hallway or the others to “liberate” so she slid her wand out of the holster and prepared to cast, facing away from the door.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian demanded.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eyes, which narrowed. “I can’t help but notice you have a wand at the moment,” she told him quietly. “What poor sucker did you con into giving it to you? Don’t actually care. Before you think of doing anything you might regret, know this. You cast at me and I’m taking you down. Hard. Then I leave you in here. Do you think Ominis will care to come get you, after he hears what you did?”

“But we have to go forward, casting a spell in that direction isn’t going to get us anywhere!”

“Have you forgotten who you’re talking to?” She cast, creating a hole in space back to the hallway outside. Light spilled into the room, and Ominis, pacing outside, perked up.

“How are Aerith and Sebastian- Hello? Is that you two? But that’s a wall, isn’t it?”

“Oh, that gateway into the forest, I forgot you made that,” he admitted. “With the gates closed, that’s really the only way out of here. Good thing you can do that.”

*Yeah, it is, isn’t it?* “The very same. Now, I’m leaving. Once this closes I’m not coming back here. Choose.” She stepped through.

“I mean when you put it that way,” he muttered, following her and putting his wand away.

“Good choice.” She made sure he was through and closed it again.

“He’s alive!” Ominis exclaimed. “Oh, Sebastian, don’t do that to me again, all right?”

“No point,” he admitted, then chuckled. “Not unless I find someone to cast crucio on, anyway.”

*Note to self. Have activation braziers moved or destroyed by a professor. That will prevent the passage from opening again, no?*

“Crucio? What did you find in there, anyway?”

“A door that wouldn’t open, so I blasted past it, then some puzzles, they were quite tricky.”

*No they weren’t.*

“Then another door that your aunt got stuck behind. I think we need to cast crucio on someone to get by it.”

“I have some papers here of hers, and her remains if you want to see them buried somewhere Ominis. We can do that this evening after class if you want. I can read you the notes too, if you can’t have your wand do it.”

“I would like that, thank you.”

“You’re really going to walk away from a secret room by Slytherin himself?” Sebastian asked them. “All because of one tiny spell?”

“I doubt you need it,” she told him. “Not really.”

“What are you talking about?”

She sighed. “Oh Sebastian, do you think he brought someone with him every time he went to get into his little room? I doubt it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tease it out, you’ll get there. Now, let’s get to class.”

*I’ll ransack the room later, when I’m alone. Should be fairly easy. Just ask a ghost to pass through the door, enter the room, and poke his or her head out the other side. There must be another way into the place he used, probably quite visible in the room. We just figure out how to open it on this side, probably a special brick you touch or something, or just blow the wall down and repair it later. Should be no problem.*

“Come on, at least give me a hint!” he whined.

“I already did!”

“No you didn’t.”

“I did.”

That evening after class, having buried the remains of Noctua Gaunt and handed over the pages, Aerith was walking back into the castle when she spotted Natty, who saw her and came over.

“Have you heard the latest on Archie?” she asked, after they greeted each other.

“No, what?”

“He’s officially being listed as kidnapped. Mrs Bickle got a ransom note she turned into the authorities. And it gets worse!”

“How so?”

“Mr. Bickle was recently murdered. Apparently that snake Harlow has been harassing the family for weeks, and this is just the latest tragedy to befall the family. She fears the worst.”

“Wait, they somehow got him out of the castle?”

She shook her head. “No. He got a letter, it was found in his room, that seemed to come from her. Said he was needed at home. He must have snuck out to see her, he doesn’t live that far away, and they grabbed him up then.”

“I see.”

“What are you thinking? You have a determined look on your face...”

“Well, just that if I was a gang of low down thieves and ne'er-do-wells, and I had kidnapped a kid, where would I go? Probably not all that far away.”

“Ne'er-do-wells? That’s a new one for me. I shall have to remember it. But we can’t just fly around the countryside we would never find their hideouts.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” she said with a smirk. “We don’t have to.” She tapped her book. “I just so happen to have a record of most, if not all, bandit camps in the area. My revelio spell somehow interacted with the book to show and mark them for me. I did it for Professor Fig weeks ago, to try and get the ministry to do something by showing just how many camps there were in the area.”

“I’m afraid to ask...”

“About fifty.”

“What? How many people does he... *How* did he get that many people?”

“I have no idea. Class sizes being what they are, if there’s five or ten people at each camp that’s a lot of people. Like, two whole grades that have gone to the dark side. But many of those are probably goblins.”

“Even so. What could he have promised them? No matter! So are you thinking rescue mission?”

“It’s possible...” *Head in. Sneak around. If he’s not there reset. Try a different location. Repeat. Checking the furthest ones is probably useless. When he’s found it’ll be ‘the first’ one I check. Yeah, that could work. And if we get into trouble... reset and try something else.*

“Are we using your spider technique again?”

She laughed. “Oh, liked that, did you?”

“It got us pretty far the last time. As we can’t use magic...”

“Or can we?” she asked back, putting a finger beside her nose.

“What?”

“We find him, we just start casting stuff. The ministry will rush to the place, and see poor missing Archie. He’ll be saved, his captives taken in for questioning, and we just sneak away with none the wiser. We won’t exactly get credit for the rescue, but then, we don’t want anyone to know we put ourselves in danger either. It’ll have to be enough that we saved him.”

“My mother especially would be quite upset with me, this is true,” she admitted. “If you are willing, I am willing too. Let’s go find Archie. Credit isn’t what I’m after. Besides, we can always tell him it was us later, and he’ll owe us the rest of his life.”

“You’re not wrong.”

So the girls used the Floo network to reach his home village and started their search. The first two camps were a bust, of course each camp was the first, from Natty’s point of view. But the third one yielded something interesting- some stacked boxes out in front of a tent. This camp was smaller than the others, with only a few people wandering around outside, making the girls wonder if Archie could be inside that small tent. High in the air they cast their invisibility charms and landed, putting the brooms inside the book and slipping around the front of the tent as the ‘guards’ expected dozens of ministry personnel from the road and so didn’t bat an eyelash. The interior, though, was a different story. It was basically a house inside, making Aerith almost gasp but she remembered she herself owned a room in the castle that could literally change configuration based on her thoughts, so this wasn’t all that great.

“I did not expect this tent to be so large on the inside. That complicates things a little,” Natty whispered.

“Just stick close and stay quiet. It being big is better for us. Anyone inside is going to be spread out. If he’s here, we’ll find him.”

“Right.”

As there was no one in the front section Aerith wasted no time in grabbing up and shoving into her book everything she could, including boxes, vases, and artwork. *All stolen, no doubt.*

“Is this the time for that?”

“We can’t do it on the way out,” she hissed. They moved on.

The place, it turned out, was loaded with treasures but every room they passed into had at least one person wandering around so she couldn’t do any more thieving. With a bit of luck though they made it to the lower level undetected, and there in a wooden cage that honestly looked a bit thrown together they found the boy they were searching for.

“He really is here!” Natty whispered.

“Time to put our plan into action,” Aerith whispered back.

There was a huge trunk laying there that the two carefully opened, making sure no one was looking in that direction. It was empty, so the girls climbed inside and shut the lid. “Are we sure about this?” Natty asked. The two were squished together, ready to cast spells without being seen.

“What? We’re just getting to the good part of our date. You did want to be closer, right?”

“This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, no.”

“Your loss. Now, let’s see. Lumos! Revelio!” The two cast a variety of minor charms into the air, and waited. They cast more. Minutes ticked by. There was a disturbance and the sound of rushing feet, away from their location.

“Oh dear, maybe you can’t apparate into a tent like this?” Natty reasoned. “They must have shown up outside, and of course the kidnappers took that as the ministry finding them and attacked at once. They’re probably fighting up there.”

*Doing their actual jobs at last, eh? Only took trying to find a couple of kids doing such dangerous magic as a light spell. Morons. Oh well.* “Should we make our escape? Go now?”

“I won’t go until I see Archie safe!”

“So you do want to spend more time in this trunk with me!”

“You know what I mean.”

“Your hand where it is tells me differently.”

“That was an accident!” She snatched her hand away but there wasn’t really that much room to move. “There’s very little room in here!” She tried to wiggle around but only further compromised her position. “Do you have to wear those short skirts *all* the time?”

“Oh, you like? Let me do another lumos, I need to see if you’re blushing.”

“You had better not!”

A few minutes later a small army of people rushed the place, and Archie started yelling. Ministry people hurried to his side and got him out, asking about other kids who might be doing magic nearby. He said he hadn’t seen anyone like that and his mother was okay and can he go back to school now. They said his mother was fine, making both relieved, and after answering some questions at the ministry he could go see her, and then go back to classes. They swept the place, but the kidnappers were now either captured or long gone. When it was clear the two got out of the trunk and used a gateway back to the castle. They had done it!

“That plan of yours worked out really well,” Natty admitted once they were safe again. “Using the ministry against itself like that! I wouldn’t have even thought of it. But it did negate the need for any spiders this time.”

“Nope, just a bit of invisibility magic. You think they could guard against it. Weird.”

“I doubt they expected a bunch of school girls to fly right to them, slip into their tent, and walk around the place.”

“True. Thanks for the help, it could just as easily gone wrong so it was nice to have someone else there to guard my back.” *Poppy would have been nicer, of course, but eh, maybe next time.*

“Of course. So, uh, do you think one of those short skirts would look good on me?”

“Let’s go try some on!”

## Chapter 38

Meddling in the Affairs  
When: Tuesday morning  
Where: Breakfast

The box of gold Aerith received that morning was not terribly unexpected. She had gotten other boxes like it, the proceeds from the auctions that had completed, delivered by elf as there was no way any number of owls could lift a heavy box full of gold coins. Nor was the one sheet of parchment detailing the items sold thus far, so she could know if she owed anyone, such as Sebastian, Poppy, Natty, or Professor Fig a split share. What was unexpected was the second piece of parchment, a letter from Mr. Pinkfeather. Basically, it told her that if she was looking to make even more money he had heard whispers of a dragon fighting event going on nearby that was taking place. Dragon fighting meant betting, and with all the gold she was earning a few hundred here or there would hardly be missed and could double or more if you played it right. If she wanted, he would be glad to look into it more and put some of her earnings on a dragon or two instead of sending it to her directly. Of course he would forward her winnings, minus a percentage for his trouble.

*Now on the one hand, I could clean up with any kind of betting because I can never lose. I just see who wins the fight, return back to earlier in the day, place my bet, and get rich. But on the other...*  
“Hey Poppy?”

Poppy, sitting next to her, looked up from her breakfast. “What’s up?”

“Betting on dragon fights? Legal?”

“Are you kidding? Every part of that sentence is illegal! Well, maybe not ‘on’ but you get the point.”

“Just how illegal we talking here? Taking candy from a baby or robbing a bank?”

“By that I take it to mean is it more morally wrong or someone goes to Askaban wrong? It’s a horrible idea to even think about such a thing. For starters you can’t train a dragon, so it’s dangerous to even be around them. What if they got loose? Bloodsport is illegal. Betting on, like, horse races is looked down upon but is probably legal, uh, in some places? I have no idea. Why?”

“Hummm, well, there goes that idea. How would you like to go after class and put a stop to an illegal dragon fighting event?”

Her smile didn’t quite light up the whole room, but it came close. “You always take me to the nicest places.”

That afternoon, from Poppy’s perspective, Aerith simply stood for a moment with her eyes closed. In reality, she went back and forth a dozen times checking out various camps in the nearby area. There were only about fifty to check, no problem at all barely an inconvenience. This time of course she started with the furthest away rather than the closest, because you don’t put your illegal dragon arena anywhere near a place someone in authority would go. Not that the ministry seemed eager to enforce its own laws, but whatever. Aerith slipped inside camps, invisible, and when there was no dragon fight there she reset and tried someplace else. Finally she came upon one of those ‘bigger on the inside’ tents and found two dragons going at it. She went back and opened her eyes.

“Right,” she exclaimed. “I know just where to go. Get on your broom and follow me!”

“How could you possibly know that?” Poppy demanded. “You just stood there!”

“Or did I?” she wondered. “Oh Poppy, my sweet little mooncalf, you don’t know *all* my secrets yet. No, no, not by a long shot.”

She snorted. “Little mooncalf, huh?”

“Well, take your pick. My fluffy kneazel, my daring niffler, my proud hippogriff-”

“Stop, stop! Okay,” she laughed. “Wow!”

“Distraction successful! Let’s go.”

“Hey wait, no really how do you, come back!” She jumped on her broom and zoomed after Aerith.

The two girls now stood overlooking the tent, thankfully there was a way to look down from above which tactically was the most unsound decision they could have made putting their tent up. Guards wandered around the outside, keeping an eye out, but of course the two girls were invisible. From here she could see many, many carriages parked nearby, and the tent itself was sitting on a small plot of land connected only via rickety wooden bridge to the nearby ground.

“You’re really not going to tell me how you knew to come right here?” Poppy whispered.

“Maybe some day,” she allowed. “Focus on what’s in front of you.”

“Fine. Let’s sneak down there and see what the situation is. With all those carriages it looks like someplace a lot of people have come to. And no offense, but I’d like to make sure this is the right place with my own eyes.”

“Not a problem. That bridge is going to creak and sway so we’ll go one at a time. I’ll hold it on my end for you, you hold it on your end for me. Stick to the right side. It looks fairly sturdy but it’s not.”

“Right.”

This was of course the third time they were having this conversation, having been caught the first two times. But she felt she had the timing right now to get past the guards, and if they could hold the bridge steady it would probably be fine. The girls crept forward and this time made it all the way into the tent. Noise assaulted them, even just peeking in the front of the tent showed them two dragons going at it in a center ring.

“Dragons, in a flammable tent like this? How stupid can they be?” muttered Poppy. “Let’s get closer.”

They did, looking out over the ring. It was barely big enough for the two dragons, giving them no room to retreat though it was curious why they didn’t just turn on the people in the stands. There was nothing between them, after all. Strange, glowing collars were seen on their necks, *maybe that’s keeping them under control somehow?* When she had first shown up she wondered if she couldn’t somehow get them off, but the two dragons were moving far too erratically to get a clean shot.

“There must be a hundred people or more in here!” Poppy muttered. “Oh, this is bad. We can’t deal with all this! Come on, let’s get back outside.”

The two retreated, then simply went around the back of the tent rather than test the bridge again. They passed a huge dragon skull, which Poppy growled at. “I hope that isn’t from this stupid place.”

“So what are you thinking?” Aerith asked her. “How do we stop this? Go tell someone at the town? We could talk to Professor Fig, he could talk to George, who could get the ministry here.”

“Oh, I’d love to see each and every person in there go down for just being here,” she answered fiercely. “They can’t turn a blind eye to all *this!* But that would all take too long!”

“So... We keep them here?”

“How?”

“How did I build a sanctuary for the animals of the wood?”

“You mean put a similar structure over the whole place? You would need Professor Fig at the least, to put the same charm on it. They could just apparate through it otherwise.”

“Good point. A distraction would be best... Humm... Poppy, would you... Would you be willing to do something a bit dangerous?”

“How dangerous?”

“Show yourself to them. Don’t cross the bridge. Distract them. I’ll start the structure growing from behind them. Then snap it closed over top of them, trapping them. Professor Fig can be casting the charm the whole time, so as soon as it snaps shut, they’re all trapped.”

“Yes, I’ll do it! If we can get this place shut down, and capture everyone inside? It’s worth the risk!”

*And it’s not that much risk, but you don’t know that. I can return if something goes too badly and try a different plan. I love being me!* “Okay, let’s sneak back to the rise, and get Professor Fig here.”

The two snuck back and both moved a fair distance away so they wouldn’t be seen. Aerith opened a hole in the air right outside Professor Fig’s office door, and she knocked. He yelled to come in, and she pushed the door open. He looked over and got up from his desk, poking his head out.

“You know, I’ll never get used to that,” he remarked. “What are you two girls up to now?”

“We need your help,” Aerith explained as he stepped through. “We’re going to catch a whole lot of people today.”

She explained the plan, and he agreed, saying it seemed like there wasn’t too much risk. He vanished, going to track down George, and the two girls went invisible again to make sure the situation didn’t change near the tent. It didn’t, and both men returned.

“Ah, nice to see you again George!” Aerith greeted him. *How that’s extra life I got for you working out? Hope you’re making the most of it.*

“And you. Been quite busy this past month haven’t you?” he replied. “What’s this about dragons?”

“There’s a whole tent down there full of people watching a dragon fight. You can take them all into custody red handed. When your people are in position we’ll close the trap.”

“Actually, it may be best to create the structure before the other ministry people arrive,” Professor Fig cautioned. “Leave how it came to be a bit mysterious. We don’t want too many questions asked here, after all. They’ll be trapped either way, correct?”

“True. We can do it that way.”

“Good. We didn’t tell anyone yet, George can easily go back and round up some people to help once everything is in place. Obviously you girls need to stay hidden for that part, much as you might want the credit for all this, it would just make you bigger targets.”

“I understand,” the girls told him.

“Let’s take our positions then,” Aerith decided.

“Wish me luck,” Poppy said lightly. “Should have worn one of your short skirts today, Aerith.”

“Wait, this girl is the bait?” George asked. “That’s no good! One of us should take that risk Eleazar. And what’s this about trapping them? I feel like I’m missing a lot of context here, just what is the plan?”

“You’ll see,” she explained. “All you need to do is cover her, that’s your part, George. Professor Fig needs to do the charm, I need to raise the barrier. She’s the only one left.”

“She could cover me, I suppose,” he thought.

“No, I want to do this!” Poppy insisted. “They won’t be as suspicious of me, anyway. I can just say I got lost, they might recognize you from the ministry.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose you’re right. I don’t like it though, I just want it said. But there isn’t much time to find a replacement.”

“You’re sure about this? If something goes wrong...” Professor Fig trailed off.

“I’ll be fine. I... know how to deal with their sort. Believe me.”

*She seems confident enough. And she can't suspect my ability, she really is pretty brave.*

"Very well."

Everyone got into position.

Poppy rounded the corner and the few guards perked up, coming in her direction. Invisible, Aerith started creating the segments, stuck into the ground on both sides of the land. It quickly rose up, forming a dome around the place in the back and closing up in the front. The bridge came last, the entire thing snapping shut to cries of "what's this?" and "what's going on?" by the guards. Poppy had done her job well, Aerith hadn't seen what she had been doing but she kept their attention and on the bridge. Professor Fig started casting even before the structure was complete, and now he pointed his wand at different parts, making the charm stronger. Aerith didn't let up either, Poppy was pretending to freak out and running away as the guards grabbed their wands. More and more material shot out of the ground, crisscrossing what was already there and wrapping the whole place up like a cocoon. In mere moments the tent, bridge, and guards were obscured from sight, completely covered by white beams.

"I made it as strong as I could, envisioning spells on the inside bouncing off," she explained. "But I have no idea how long it'll hold." *The inside of the tent must have gone dark from all that, hopefully they're nice and terrified now. Serves them right, given what they were watching. Yeah, how does it feel, jerks? Dragon is on the other foot now- wait...*

"I was strengthening it as I could too," Professor Fig told her. "Unbreakable charms. Er, but how do we get them out?"

"That's the best part," Aerith said with a grin. "I have a door set into the end of the bridge. They can come out one at a time. They toss their wand through the slot, the door gets opened for one person. George-" She looked over, ready to tell him he could go and get some people to start taking them into custody, but he was white as a ghost and staring at her. "Er?"

"Merlin-" he managed. "Are you Merlin reborn? I've never seen any magic like that!"

"Ah." She refused. "Yes. Forget you had never seen that happen. It can be quite surprising, yes."

"You made that dome in the forest, didn't you? We've been wondering where it came from. I guess now we know. How- how did you do that? What spell did you use? Can you teach us?"

"Sorry, I can't," she admitted. "It's not something I can teach."

"Now you see why we wanted it kept to just us," Professor Fig told him. "It's all to do with what Miriam was researching, and that container she sent you. We've had some breakthroughs, I'll explain it all at some point. Let's just get these people processed for now."

"Yes... Of course. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I'll be back." He vanished.

He didn't have to wait long, several confused looking ministry personnel appeared and took charge. They figured out how to get the door open, and it then turned into a long line of people, and goblins it turned out, being taken in for questioning. A wand meant freedom, though of course goblins were allowed out without one. Aerith had purposefully left a slot in the door, and anyone trying to rush the exit was stunned and the door simply closed again until they thought better of it. Once it was discovered no one could apparate out, that door became their only option while the bridge was a choke point. They realized they were well and truly trapped, and decided cooperation was the only way forward. Those outside could wait indefinitely, after all, while those inside, not so much. It turned quite orderly as wands were confiscated, the perpetrator apparated away with a guard, who returned a moment later to take someone else in. More and more ministry people appeared as more were brought in to help, but it still took about two hours to empty the place out. After no one started coming out the ministry people went in, sweeping the place for invisible people or those that could become animals. Poppy, Aerith, and Professor Fig watched all this rather gleefully, especially when Professor Fig could identify someone.

“Oh, that’s the undersecretary of the minister for magic!” he announced. “That’s the junior officer for standards and measurements! This is going to completely *rock* the magical world! Oh, that’s a reporter, there’s another it looks like word is already getting out.” More people had appeared, and started writing down what they saw as ministry people tried to push them back.

“We did good,” Poppy decided.

“And with minimal risk,” Professor Fig added. “Very well done, girls. But however did you find this place?”

“Yeah, however did you find this place?” Poppy asked seriously, gazing at Aerith and crossing her arms.

“Mr. Pinkfeather offered to help me place bets. I wouldn’t have known about it otherwise.”

“Yes, but finding the specific location...”

“That’s going to have to stay my secret.”

“I see.”

Another hour later and George came charging up the hill, looking excited. “This just made my career, I think. Did you see some of the people we pulled out of there?”

“We did,” Eleazar told him. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, thank you, but seriously. Aerith. I have no idea what’s really going on but this is huge. If you ever need my help with anything, don’t hesitate to ask okay? I know the truth. I mean I can’t exactly say a fifteen year old girl was behind all this, now can I? But all the credit is yours as far as I’m concerned.”

“So long as the bad guys are caught, that’s enough for me. For now. I’ll remember your words to me today though.”

“Forget that,” Poppy jumped in. “What about the dragons? Are they okay?”

“We stopped them fighting, those collars seem to make them docile when apart. We’ll be studying them, of course. We found a third dragon, chained up in the basement of the place, along with an egg. We’ll be... very carefully... releasing them both back to wild.”

“An egg? Can we see it?” she asked, eyes wide.

“I suppose?” he figured. “Most have cleared out, it’s all hands on deck so to speak dealing with this many people. Our cells are full to bursting at the moment, never dreamed we’d have this many to deal with. A quick look wouldn’t hurt, the dragons are the least of our problems at the moment.”

“I’ll take the shell down, if you’re sure no one is left inside,” Aerith told him.

“Yes, that would be super helpful,” he admitted. “Those dragons need to get out under their own power, we’ll have to move the tent somehow without disturbing them too much. We’ve got a lot of work to do because of all this.”

“I can imagine. I’ll get started.” Aerith cast again, reversing what she did and turning the shell back into nothing.

The two ransacked the place, there were various crates, vases, and scattered gold all over George said was fine to “go missing.” He said to leave anything “too fancy” that may be stolen and an owner found, but any crates of books, generic nick-knacks and the like were fine. The cages, and there were many cages of every size all over the place, they left alone. That was evidence. The egg, in a special cage that kept it warm so it could still be viable one day, was the real star of the day. Poppy especially liked that, it was a brilliant purple and almost scaly itself. She had to be dragged away from it, and the captured dragon she tried to calm down. Moving the egg to within sight of the dragon helped, she seemed to realize Poppy meant her no harm and while not exactly happy with her situation, at least she wasn’t hurting herself trying to break free of the chains she was in.

“Was probably terribly mistreated by those that caught her,” Poppy reasoned. “Seeing me now, not hurting her and showing her that her egg is safe, calmed her down. How they’re going to get her out of here though...”

“Wait until she’s asleep, then put a shrink spell on her? Just carry her out, maybe?” Aerith wondered. “They got her in here easily enough, one imagines, as the place isn’t burned to the ground.”

“Yes, that could work. Bye, beautiful. You’ll be back in the wild soon enough.”

Back at the castle, the two were about to go their separate ways. Poppy had been riding high the whole time, and turned to thank Aerith as they entered.

“That was a fantastic second date,” she said bumping up against Aerith’s arm playfully. “I can’t wait to see what you’ve got planned for the third.”

“Maybe together we could bring back some extinct species or something,” she joked. “That would seal the deal, right?”

“You got that right,” she laughed. “But seriously, tonight was amazing. Poachers caught, ministry officials implicated, dragon eggs. What an experience. See you tomorrow in class!”

“Bye Poppy.”

## Chapter 39

Cleanup

When: Friday Evening

Where: The Three Broomsticks

The wizarding world had been rocked, and not in the good way. The papers, for days afterwards, had run story after story about the scandal of various ministry officials being caught participating in blood sports, and with dragons, no less. Books were being audited, new people were being brought in to remove any possibility of corruption, and the minister was giving daily speeches about how awful all this was and how he would get to the bottom of it. Also of concern were the numerous goblins that had been participating, as the collars for the two dragons had indeed been crafted by them. Some had even been captured as part of the sweep, but they weren't talking and the goblin government, backed by the bank, was insisting they didn't need to and should be returned to their custody. Where, it was decided in the wizarding world they would simply be let go without further comment. People were finally demanding answers to the big questions, like "what are all those drill thing doing tunneling under the ground for" and "why wasn't all this stopped beforehand?" People were even starting to form groups and go looking for the drills, leading to fights with goblins which the minister was also trying to dissuade. "Then do your \*\*\*\*\* job then!" was the usual response to this particular part of the speech.

Aerith, her roommates, Poppy, Natty, Nerida, Anne, Sebastian, and Ominus (both looking a little out of sorts being around so many girls) were at the three broomsticks, celebrating. They knew exactly how all of this had come to be, and were treating Aerith to dinner. They had gotten permission to come to the village as a group, as both Professors Fig and Weasley knew how this had happened as well. She wasn't exactly thrilled with Aerith doing something like this, her pass to leave school grounds predicated on finding magical sites and absorbing them, but Aerith argued that everything was connected. The Keepers had buried something Isidora had made relating to intuitive magic, the goblins were looking for it, the humans were raising money to build the drills to look for it. And she hadn't just gone in there and tried to slaughter everybody, she had done it in the safest way possible and no one had gotten hurt. There couldn't have been a better outcome.

"Wish I was well enough to go on adventures, like you two," Anne said to them.

"You're doing better though, aren't you?" Aerith asked.

"I'm getting better at hiding my pain, yes," she admitted. "But it's still there. Being at the castle has helped. Getting sleeping potions that can get me through the night has helped. Being around you all has helped. But I don't think I'll ever be able to run around and break up dragon fighting arenas like that."

"We'll get you better," she promised. "Sebastian is going to look into *purely healing magic* from now on, instead of the dark arts." *And maybe, one day, when I feel I've practiced enough with intuitive magic and I don't mean just making shapes appear out of nowhere, I can do something.*

"I am, actually," he agreed. "Aerith gave me a stern talking to, let me tell you. But she had a good point. You can't fight fire with fire, I need to learn how to fill up a bucket."

"One late night trip at a time?" Sabrina asked.

“Gross, we’re eating,” Elle shushed her. “Don’t be disgusting.”

“I want to know what’s next,” Natty spoke up. “We may have weakened them, but Harlow is probably still out there, scheming up ways to replace the lost revenue from the fights. In fact, if he was in charge of this, and he probably was, I expect he’s desperately trying to keep Victor from killing him in a fit of rage. He seems like the type to not give many second chances.”

“No, a guy like that always has another plan,” Nerida decided. “It’s the Slytherin thing to do.”

“Did you have another plan for getting that pendent from the cave?” Aerith asked her.

“As a matter of fact I did. I had been improving my Mermish, and was just working up the courage to throw my shell into the water and apologize to whoever showed up and reveal I couldn’t swim and ask them to get it for me. So there.”

“Glad I came along then, and you didn’t have to do that.”

“Me too. But what is your plan for Harlow?”

“Don’t have one. I’m not going to go looking for the man. He’s the ministry’s problem. You’ve heard the minister saying vigilante action against the goblins won’t be tolerated. It’ll be the same sort of thing if I raid all his camps, find him, and try to capture him myself. That’s why Poppy and I just sort of summoned the ministry like we did at the dragon tent. So they could take care of it. There was a clear violation of the law going on. They had to respond once they saw it. Harlow just sitting around balancing his books or whatever, isn’t good enough. We need evidence to present against him if we want him stopped.”

“I have evidence against him,” said a voice. All the kids at the table turned to look at the woman sitting at the bar near them. She was wearing a white blouse with blue tie and a thick black belt that held her wand, much like Aerith’s own. Her hair was cut very short, and she had been slumped at the bar since the group had come in, looking miserable.

“You do?” Aerith gasped.

She nodded sadly. “I’m Daisy, Daisy Rabe. Sorry, but I couldn’t help but overhear. You’re the driving force behind the dragon ring raid? Did I hear that right?”

“Oh, uh, don’t tell anyone,” Aerith pleaded. “I want to keep my name out of it.”

“I don’t blame you, it would be very dangerous for you if those men you were discussing knew about you. So you made that weird cage thing around the tent and called it in? How did you do that?”

“Just a spell I had been working on. But never mind about that. What’s the evidence? Can we send it to the papers? Tell the Ministry?”

“It isn’t that sort of evidence. It’s a note from that ashwinder gang, saying they’ve taken my husband and unless I help them... Well...”

There were gasps from the table.

“Taken your husband? When?”

“Just days ago. After the dragon fight was shut down, they probably needed other ways to make money, like you were saying. Because of where I work, Gringotts, they want me to extort people into helping him open vaults. I’ve tried telling him it’s impossible, without the key you simply can’t get a vault door open. But he doesn’t believe me, and... Well, here.” She handed over a note, and the others got up to crowd around Aerith to read it. It was the usual sort of language, threats and whatnot, and they expected their answer “By week’s end? That’s right now!”

“I know. I despair of ever seeing him again, but what can I do?”

“Rescue him, of course!” Aerith decided as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. She also set a new return point, taking a good look at the woman and noticing this particular moment. *Done.*

“But how? I’ve no idea where he is!”

“He must be close,” Natty told her. “If they expected a reply soon, they would need to show you he was alive so you would continue to do what they wanted.”

“Exactly!” Aerith agreed. “Dinner is over, everyone. Thank you for this, but you should all go back to the castle.”

“We can help!” everyone protested. Everyone but Anne, that is.

Aerith shook her head. “Less is more right now. We’ll find where Mrs. Rabe’s husband is, sneak in there, and rescue him like we did with Archie. Actually, if we can get in and out we could have officer Singer call in others and arrest them all red handed, given both of your testimony.”

“Just like that?” Daisy questioned. “In the first place I can’t ask you to put yourself in danger. And in the second, how are you going to find him?”

“She can do it,” Poppy said with conviction. “Don’t ask me how, she wouldn’t tell me. Yet. But there’s more to her than meets the eye. Mrs. Rabe, you can *completely* put your trust in Aerith. Let her help.”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Let’s go,” she continued, looking to everyone else. “Let’s give her some space and get back. Work the magic, if you will. There’s nothing we can do for her now. You better come back though, unharmed.”

“You have my word, Poppy.”

“Good. I’ll hold you to that. See you soon.”

They filed out, all wishing her luck, and soon it was just her and Daisy.

“So what’s the plan?”

“Easy. Like Natty said he must be close. Hey Sirona!”

“What can I do for you?” asked the bartender.

“Can I borrow your owl for a minute, some parchment and a quill?”

“Owl?” She looked back at the owl on the stand, which was of course there the whole time in case she needed to send a letter or whatever. “I suppose?”

“Thanks.”

With the parchment and quill she wrote “Dragons first, you’re next,” down and rolled it up, attaching it to the owl’s leg. She put her hand out and the owl stepped onto it, and they went outside. With her other hand she took out two brooms, her good one and a spare one from the Room. Daisy took one with a look that said something like “I have to fly on this ratty old thing?” but accepted it. “Okay, tell it who we’re looking for. I don’t know the guy’s full name.”

“You’re going to find him via mail?” she stammered.

“How else? Owls seem to know how to reach whoever they need to in order to deliver mail. I’m guessing he’s somewhere around town, we shouldn’t have to go far.”

“I never would have thought of using the *mail* to track someone down.”

“A fairly big weakness, but I suppose ye wizards of old that started training the first owls to deliver mail believed everyone would be a model citizen and not need any way to stay anonymous. Thankfully, no bad guys will ever think of this method to, and I’m just throwing something out there, send an owl to someone hiding in the woods with two of their friends to avoid being killed by dark wizards.”

“That sounds awfully specific.”

“Just a random example from the top of my head.”

“Right. Anyway, get ready.”

“Ready!” She threw her leg over the broom.

“Oh, now I see why the short skirt. Brilliant. Anyway, deliver this to Theopolis Harlow.”

The owl took off.

And it didn’t go a hundred meters, circling around to the back of the Hog’s Head bar and tapping on the wooden door to the basement. Aerith grabbed it again and quickly went around the

corner. Both went invisible, the owl looking upset at this blatant disregard for the sanctity of the mail. But it too stayed quiet. Nothing happened. “Thanks,” she said to the owl, pulling the “letter” off the leg again. “Go back home now.”

“Who?”

“You. Go back to Sirona.”

“Who?”

“The lady that owns the bar. Sirona. Where you came from.”

“Whokay.” It flew off.

“Did it just... never mind. Let’s go, and be quiet.”

“You should stay here!”

“You should stay here,” she hissed back. “Who just found your husband two minutes after learning he was in trouble? Me, that’s who. Who. Who. Hehe. Sorry. Believe me, this isn’t my first rodeo.” *And I need to make sure you don’t get caught too. We can always go back if I can see the problem myself.*

“Fine, come on.”

She cast a few spells on the door, breaking any magic on them, and then silencing them in case the hinges were squeaky, and both descended.

“It’s a cellar,” Daisy remarked, looking around. A large barrel was before them, flanked by two smaller barrels. “Now what?”

“Well, we know why no one came,” Aerith told her. “Revelio! Ah, that middle barrel is hollow. Probably a secret door, we’ll need to figure out how to open it.”

“Wait, that’ll take too long,” Daisy protested. She pointed her wand at the barrel and cast. The front of it shrunk and hit the ground with a soft clunk, showing a doorway beyond. The two went invisible again and stepped through.

“This is all under the town?” she whispered, looking around. It was a large room full of boxes, benches, a nice carpet, and led to another room with a stairway down to a stone chamber. This chamber was even more massive, with junk piled absolutely everywhere and a cadre of tough looking blokes at a table that seemed to be complaining about how long Daisy was taking to get back to them. *But how was she supposed to get back to you? Is someone waiting at her house while she was actually out at the bar? I don’t get it. Which one is Harlow? I could end you right now, but then I would have your blood on my hands. Better to stick to the plan.* The two ladies started forward, Aerith’s fingers itching to put all these boxes and crates and vases and other expensive looking stuff into her book and sell them. But this wasn’t the time. The two made their way around and entered a back room. This was fairly lavish, with a huge fireplace of all things, *don’t ask me how that works.* A huge wooden table sat in the middle, junk of all kinds (like your basic three human skull sculpture) piled atop it. There were tapestries upon the walls, fine rugs on the floors. *Honestly, if these people needed money just sell some of this stuff. What the heck.* But most important of all, there was Mr Rabe, behind bars. There was no one in the room, so she rushed to him and asked if he was okay. He was. Aerith was watching the doorway, keeping watch, and a moment later Daisy came back over to her.

“He doesn’t have his wand, and the door is trapped in some way. Trying to open it may alert everyone. We need to find it.”

“The wand may be a lost cause. You keep watch. I can get him out. But I need you to *not look back at us.* Do you understand? You will not look to see what I’m doing with my magic. Is that clear?”

“This is all very irregular, what are you-”

“We don’t have time. I can get him out. Do you want him out?”

“Yes!”

“Then watch this door, and do not turn around.”

“Fine!”

“Okay.” She went over to him. “Hello, Mr. Rabe. I’ll get you out of there.”

“You can’t, the door-”

She shushed him. “Never mind the door. Close your eyes and do not open them until I tell you to. No matter what happens. Is that clear?”

“What?”

“Just do it!”

“I’m doing it!” He squeezed his eyes closed.

She pointed her wand, creating a gateway that bridged centimeters. She could see right into his cell, after all. When complete she just grabbed him. He yelled, but didn’t open his eyes. She canceled the gateway, and nodded. “You can open your eyes now.”

“How in the world...”

“Come on, let’s go.”

“He’s out?” Daisy asked, shock written plain on her face.

“Yes. Cast the disillusionment charm on him and let’s go.” *I wish I could see their faces when they come back to check on their “prisoner.”*

The three went back the same way they came, skirting the edges of the room and moving slowly to not attract any attention. But the men at the table were engrossed about arguing about how much they should cut off Mr. Rabe to get his wife to cooperate. They slipped past, and were out. The three went right to Officer Singer, and he told his story.

She seemed strangely hesitant.

“I’ll look into it,” she told them.

“Look into it?” Daisy almost screeched. “My husband was held against his will for days, the men responsible are just sitting down there in some secret room under the Hog’s Head, and your response is that you’ll look into it? You may never get another chance to catch them! Get some other officers around and storm the place!”

“There’s more to taking down an organization like the Ashwinders than simply storming in and hauling them off based on a few accusations.”

“A few- We’re both respected members of the community! I work directly for the bank. Are you telling me *my word*, and the word of my husband *who can identify his attackers* is not good enough?”

“That is exactly what I am saying. I’m glad you’re all right Mr. Rabe but there’s nothing more I can do for you tonight. Good evening.” She walked away.

All three stood in a stunned silence until she got out of sight.

“She’s compromised,” both Rabes said at the same time.

“Compromised?” Aerith asked.

“It’s the only explanation as to her apathy. A bust like this, that she headed up? Why, that’s something an officer like her would dream of. We can tell her the layout of the place, how many people are there, she could have them locked down in a few moments with little risk. And she just left. I don’t believe this!”

“So, what? She’s taking money to look the other way?”

“Or she’s been threatened, like I was,” Daisy mused. “But I would hope... No. If they can do that...”

“Never mind,” Aerith told them. “You’re safe, that’s what matters. Don’t move alone for the next few weeks. Maybe take some time off. Get away from here. Public opinion is turning against the ministry, it won’t be long before everyone has to clean house. Maybe someone new will work here soon, or at least the ministry will be forced to do something about all this.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath,” Daisy told her. “But whatever. Thank you for this! I can’t believe it was that easy!”

“How did you find me, anyway?” he asked.

“Owl! Now that I think about it, I could have just sent *you* a letter, and followed the owl. Wow, I’ve been stupid my whole life? What else is staring me in the face that I’m not seeing?”

“Come now dear...”

“No, no, leave me to my revelations. Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you. Pity about my wand, but I have my life. I can go find another wand.”

“I hope so,” Aerith replied. “Glad you’re okay. See you around.”

“Will you be okay? You’re going back to the castle, right? Do you want an escort?”

“To the nearest Floo node? It’s right over there.” Aerith pointed.

She chuckled. “Right, right. Never mind. If you even need something, come find me. After our vacation, that is.”

“Stay safe.”

“We will.”

Both vanished.

*And now, for a little payback. Pity about the stuff, but what can you do?* Aerith headed back to the entrance, a wicked plan in mind. She stopped by the door and opened it. Then she cast. A gateway opened, covering it completely. And what was the other end connected to? Someplace she had seen recently- the bottom of the lake. Water smashed into the place, no doubt spilling into the underground chambers in a torrent, and she happily walked away. *No one is getting out this way. I’ll come turn it off... In an hour or so.*

## Chapter 40

Leading the blind

When: Saturday Morning

Where: The Map Room

Aerith was standing with Professor Fig in the map room, where she went every day (mostly) after class to see if the Old Farts in the Paintings had decided to cooperate that day and tell her where the next “trial” was. Usually, they had not. But today was going to be the day!

“I’m sorry, the entrance to the next trial is where, again?” Aerith asked.

“The headmaster’s office,” Niamh repeated.

“But aren’t they usually underground? Is this one different?”

“I cannot give you any information about it beforehand. You will have to win through on your own.”

“I don’t- fine. Whatever. What should I look for?”

“My painting hangs in the headmaster’s office. I will guide you once you arrive.”

“Very well.” She turned to Professor Fig. “Let’s go talk to the man. I’ve really only dealt with Professor Wesley but he won’t mind us poking around his office, right?”

“He’s actually away from the school more than he’s here,” he admitted. “It’s like he doesn’t care about the place at all, really. I’m still baffled why he accepted the position, to be honest.”

“Prestige? Money? He can give all the actual problems to Professor Wesley and make her do all the hard work so he can just sit back?”

“Possibly all of those things. Ah, Niamh, how long will we need in the office? I assume the entire trial isn’t going to be held there?”

“Indeed not. Only a moment.”

“Good. As he’s not in at the moment, and can’t go directly to the office anyway, you should be safe enough. Come along, I’ve got the perfect plan to get you inside.”

*So do I, but I wonder what he’s come up with.* “I’ll see you in a bit, Professor Fitzgerald.”

“See you then.”

The two went back to his office, Professor Fig chortling the whole way, and went around his desk rubbing his hands together. “I’ve been waiting for an excuse to use this,” he crowed. “Are you familiar with polyjuice potion?”

“I’m not sure...”

“Well, it’s a potion to turn you into someone else. Of course you need a piece of them, don’t accidentally use cat hair! But luckily I’ve prepared for this as well. We can turn you into the headmaster long enough to get his password from his house elf, and get inside. No problem! Just let me get the potion, and we’ll finish it up by adding the hair. Now where did I put that? Or was it a nail clipping? I have it labeled, don’t worry.”

*Ew. Don’t involve me in your weird fetish.* “Er, no?” she countered. “We won’t be doing that, at all?”

“I suppose you have a better idea?” he scoffed.

“I do, actually. He has windows, right?”

“On his office? Sure, there’s windows. What does that have to do with anything?”

She tried very, very hard not to sigh. *He does know what my magic can do, right?* “Just show me the inside while on a broom. I’ll then use an intuitive magic door and bypass his normal door and just go in that way.”

“Oh.” He paused and considered. “But... the potion! My beautiful plan!”

She held up her hand. “No thank you. Let’s go.”

So the two flew around a bit and Professor Fig showed her the inside of the headmaster’s office. There were some doors here as well, that Aerith looked over, but Professor Fig said even though they probably *could* use the unlocking spell to just open the door and walk in, there could be some kind of charm on the door that would let him know that happened. Safest to use her magic, which she did, and hopped off her broom to the floor below. Nothing happened, no alarms went off and she wasn’t turned into a rabbit or anything so she looked around. “Hey, there’s the hat! He keeps it locked up? What, is he afraid it’ll get loose and start eating people or something? Hold on.” She took a closer look. “Was this made with intuitive magic? I see traces of it...”

“Perhaps, and that’s why we’ve never been able to replicate it,” Professor Fig told her. “Let’s not dilly-dally.”

“Who says dilly-dally anymore? Professor Fitzgerald?”

“I’m here,” said the portrait. “I suppose you’re going to take Professor Fig with you, despite my insistence you do not?”

“You suppose correctly.”

“I have no idea what the enchantment will do for more than one person. You’re taking a risk doing this.”

“I don’t mind sitting it out,” he told her. “But it has been interesting seeing what the magic can do.”

“No, you’re coming. If it breaks, so much the better. What are we looking for?”

“A book. The enchantment will react to make it visible when a person that can use intuitive magic is near. You won’t be able to miss it.”

The two looked around the room, and a book did appear when Aerith got near a certain dais. “Why hasn’t he put anything on this surface?” Aerith wondered. “He’s got stuff everywhere else.”

“Another charm keeps his mind off it, he simply doesn’t consider it when looking for a place to store things in this office.”

“Huh. Mind magics. Seems awfully close to the forbidden spells, but whatever. Shall we?” She held out a hand.

“Is that necessary, do you think?”

“I’m not getting separated from you, this should help.”

“Very well.” He took her hand and she touched the book, triggering the enchantment and the office was empty again.

The two found themselves in a strange spot, completely white apart from small black flakes floating through the air. She looked over and Professor Fig also looked completely black, like he was made of ink lines. She looked to her hands, same thing.

“How curious,” he remarked. “We went into the book? No, that can’t be right.”

“It’s probably a portkey,” she decided. “We’re just in a cave.”

“Yes, you’re right. But what is this odd effect we’re under? Some kind of illusion? That’s a very esoteric branch of magic, you never see anyone studying it!”

“Uh, hello?” a voice called out. It was Niamh’s voice. “Can we get started here or...”

“Of course! Is that you I’m hearing or some kind of recording?” Aerith shouted to the white void.

"You shall be witness to a fable," the voice continued.

*Recording then. No answer.*

"Pay attention."

*Your words are a matter of pride?*

"Things are not always as they seem."

*They usually are though?*

"You must move swiftly and cautiously. Use the tools you encounter to find me."

The landscape started to fill in, again seemingly made of lines, showing a bridge leading to a small number of houses before her.

"The first you will need is a cloak."

"Why, is it going to rain?" she asked.

The voice said nothing.

"How do we want to proceed?" Professor Fig asked. "There's probably only one cloak. I could stay here while you go forward, jumping through the hoops here will probably clear this out and I can just walk to the end."

"What is this stuff, anyway?" Aerith asked, bending to run her fingers through the 'grass' that was nearby. "It feels odd?"

"I have no idea," he admitted. "Does it seem like intuitive magic?"

"If it does I have no idea how to counteract it. It can't be real though, right?"

"Let's check the bridge." He pointed.

"Ah, good idea."

The two walked over, it wasn't far ahead, and looked the bridge over. It was a fairly sturdy stone bridge, and a voice rang out as they got near. "In this place, as in life, death takes many forms. Avoid each of them at all costs."

"We'll do, voice from nowhere," she shouted back.

Professor Fig knelt by the edge, and reached his hand out, Aerith came over next to him. "Doesn't feel like anything is there. I think this may actually be a real drop. I worry that if we deviate from the script of this magic, we may end up falling into a pit that is covered by illusion."

"Oh. There goes my idea to just head that way," she pointed past the houses, "and not follow the road at all. Just sneak behind everything."

"We could try that. Just have to be extra cautious, that's all."

"But nothing here can actually *hurt* us, right? That voice said to avoid death in many forms, but this magic, whatever it is, isn't actually going to kill me if I don't follow the script, right?"

"If they really enchanted something to cast a killing curse if you step out of line... No, that would be going too far. I think it's just a scare tactic to keep you on the path."

"In that case..." she considered. "You may not be the person for the job this time. Sorry Professor. Hope you don't mind if you don't actually get to do this one with me."

"You're going back?"

"Yes. I have something special in mind for this. Bye for now."

She went back.

Aerith had to relieve an hour or so after she got up, as that was her latest return point, but didn't bother heading to the map room. She already knew what she needed to know. Instead she walked up to the one person who could probably help her with this more than anyone else.

"Hey Ominis," she greeted. "Got a minute, or sixty?"

"Aerith? Hello there. How did yesterday go? Did you find that man?"

"We did! We think Officer Singer is compromised as she did nothing once I busted him out. The gang's plans are all wet though." She giggled.

"I don't get the reference."

"Never mind. How would you like to help me with something? Specifically, can you teach me how to do what you do? With your wand? So I don't have to use my eyes?"

"Why would you want to?"

"Let's just say I need to do something and I can't trust my eyes in this case. Can you do it?"

"I don't think so. I was only able to do what I can do with careful practice and experimentation for many years."

"Ah, I see. Then you get to come with. I can't really explain too much, but would you mind walking with me a bit? We're going somewhere that seems covered in illusion magic if you can believe it, and you may be the perfect person to help me break it."

"As long as you don't ask me to perform any dark magic, I'm up for it."

"Great. Hang one one second." She cast her doorway to the headmaster's office, ignoring the looks from the other people in the room. They had seen her doorway to the forest by now. She hauled Ominis through and to the book.

"Don't mind us," she said to the portrait of Niamh, who was sputtering and trying to ask a hundred questions at once. Like "how did you get in here" and "how did you know this was the place" and "how did you know there was a book?" That sort of thing. The pair translated space, and Ominis called for her to slow down.

"No problem, we're here. What do you- oh, ignore this voice."

The voice played again, saying the same stuff.

"Yup, no intelligent life anywhere. So, where are we, can you tell?"

"A very large cavern," he answered. "I've never experienced a place so big and empty. What just happened?"

"The short answer is, we used a portkey to go someplace, at the end of which is a thing I need and some memories. You can't see it, but this whole place looks like a village to me. But I'm just going to close my eyes, ignore everything, and you're going to walk us through. Clear?"

"I suppose. There are some drop offs, we'll have to avoid them."

"Naturally."

"I guess take my hand?"

"Actually..." She stepped behind him, and put her hands on his shoulders. "Not that I don't trust you, but just in case there's a small hole to your side this way we can go single file."

"Very well."

"Great." She closed her eyes. "Forward, march!"

The voice said various things but both ignored it, Aerith simply following Ominis through the 'maze' of proper and improper places to step. Finally he stopped.

"A birdbath?" he asked.

Her eyes popped open and she blinked. They were at the end of the trial and the usual pensive was sitting there, and the usual enormous statue hovered over them.

"Do you see a statue?" she asked.

"A what? No. It's a fairly small room, no door that I can sense along the walls. Some odd artwork, I guess it is? There's some things on display at the edges."

"You just just paid, Ominis. And it's not a birdbath. It's a pensive. I wonder... It has nothing to do with eyes. Stick your head in it when I do."

"Do what?"

"Just trust me!"

"I suppose I've come this far."

"That's... the spirit?" She collected the wand piece and stuck her head in, followed by Ominis. The memory began.

It was Isidora and Niamh, walking along on a path near her home. Isidora spoke of how overblown Percival's concerns were, now that she had found a way to contain the negative emotions she was pulling from people. Niamh was angry she hadn't stopped after her father's 'treatment.' Isidora went on about how brilliant she was in choosing goblin smiths to create the container, which set Niamh off further. But then Isidora said something new- and she perked right up. That somehow she could use this negative emotion to enhance her ability to wield magic.

*Do what? How? That doesn't even make sense.*

Niamh wasn't convinced, but plowed ahead anyway with some nonsense about "in the right hands" and not-there Aerith snorted. *Only one person can create these 'emotion strands' so what exactly are you worried about? No one can use this so called power but her. So how can it ever be in "the wrong hands" exactly?*

Isidora went on about how everyone is some kind of pain, and demonstrated by almost pulling something from Niamh, and Aerith perked up again.

*Hold on, something is funny here. She was walking along, totally at ease. She did not have her wand in her hand. They turned. They spoke. She gestured with her hands. Now suddenly in the memory she's holding her wand? When did she get it out? How? I didn't notice that at all. Something very fishy about all this...*

Niamh got flustered after this, watching Isidora 'breathe in' the 'magic' which was just, no, Aerith couldn't accept what she was seeing it was too far-fetched, and ran off. The recording ended, and both came out of the memory. She looked around, it was a chamber now, whatever was covering it up had gone at last. No stone figure like she had seen, but ah, there were some goodies on display she would happily loot and share with Ominis and there was the way they had come. As she expected, it was just an empty cave, and she turned to thank Ominis for his hard work. He looked... A bit excited.

"Was that sight?" he finally managed. "Color? Texture? The sky? Clouds? That was incredible!"

"So it did work," Aerith mused. "Interesting. Yes, that was what we sighted people experience. Which makes me wonder..."

"I've really been missing out!"

"Could we make some magical glasses or something that bypass your eyes? Whatever this liquid memory stuff is, clearly it can bypass your eyes. So magic itself can do it. Maybe-"

"You think it would work again? I'm trying it again!" He shoved his head back in the basin.

*You have fun, Ominis. I'm going to get looting.*

After several repetitions and Aerith promising to look into a pensieve of her own so she could at least give Ominis her memories of them being together so he could remember seeing them as she saw them, the two touched the wall and were transported back to the map room. Ominis ran off to tell Sebastian about "seeing" for the first time, Aerith told him he couldn't get lost on the way up and to just take the stairs. The paintings glared down at her.

"Welcome back," Niamh grumbled. "Mind telling us what that was all about? And who was that?"

"Sure," Aerith agreed lightly. "As soon as you tell me what that little funhouse attraction was about. We've already discussed how pointless this all is, but that one really took the cake. From what I heard, anyway, I didn't actually follow your script. That boy that just ran off is blind so his wand led us through it."

"I cannot believe how flippantly you are treating all this!"

"Similarly, I can't believe how pointless it is. But let me guess what comes next: something something, not going to let me near the last trial, I remind you of the goblin threat, delay hemming and hawing. Do I have that about right?"

"How did you know the location, by the way?" Percival asked.

*No, you haven't really earned that.* “Let’s focus on Isidora instead. I assume with only one more trial things are coming to a head. She’ll be really making trouble for you in the next memory so let me make sure I have her story clear in my mind. Okay? Here we go; In the beginning her brother and father lived in a small village that, for some reason, was facing a drought. Because they were terrible wizards, I guess. Young Isidora watches as you make it rain but allow her brother to die. Her father can’t seem to deal and retreats inside himself. No one helps him either. Years pass and she’s invited to Hogwarts as a fifth year, and it’s shown she can use the same magic as you, Percival. Intuitive magic. As a kid you make her practice making pillars, and fail to convince her to not look into magic that can heal her father. Again, you offer the man no help or support for the loss of his child that you were responsible for. How is he even still alive? What’s he been doing to support himself all these years? Never mind, not important. Years pass. Isidora, for some bizarre reason, *leaves*, and you just let her go. Rather than working with her to see if together you could actually do something for her father, guiding her into a good path, she instead works on her magic outside your purview. She returns to teach at the school, and shows you what she can do. Again, rather than support and guidance you offer condemnation and ultimatums. What result did you have in mind at that point, that she would just magically see your point of view and stop? Predictably, she continues experimenting so she can prove you wrong, at one point having enough negative emotion she needs to contact goblins to make something to put them all in. She claims these negative emotions are somehow making her stronger? There were some inconsistencies in the memory. Can they break down? Anyway, something terrible happens, you seal the emotions up because you can’t figure out what to do with them. Fast forward to today and goblins are trying to find the emotions probably to use them against us, sending them out into the world to cripple us and take over while we’re experiencing emotions that are not our own. How did I do?”

“She hasn’t taken our trails to heart at all!” said a new voice. A man with a turban stepped into view from the forth painting. “I refuse to tell such a misguided girl the location of the forth trial.”

“Called it.” *Oh did I say that out loud.* “But am I *wrong* though?” she asked quickly. “Was any of what I said incorrect? Factually inaccurate? I haven’t gotten *her* side of the story, so naturally your memories are a bit stilted away from her. But it seemed she just wanted to do good in the world. Rather than redirect that impulse you simply hoped it would go away. It didn’t. And here we are.”

“It will be years before she has the maturity to become a new keeper, if at all!” he insisted.

Aerith just laughed. “I’m trying to clean up *your* mess here. If you haven’t figured that out yet, then yeah, maybe I’m not fit to be a ‘keeper.’ Tell you what, just hop out of your painting there, and go find someone else. Meanwhile, I’ll actually be out there, trying to keep a goblin from finding the thing you won’t share with me. Maybe I’ll just go join him, find it together! Wouldn’t that be a hoot? You think on that, sir, down here in the dark. Good day.”

She spun on her heel and left, fuming all the way back to the castle proper.

## Chapter 41

### Popping Up

When: Monday Afternoon, two weeks later

Where: Main hall

“Heyyyyyy Poppy!” Aerith greeted her friend, sitting down at the table next to her.

Poppy blushed and looked away. “What’s with that greeting? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Wanna go on an advennnnnnture?” she further teased.

“What sort of an adventure?”

“Ah ah ah,” she wiggled a finger in the air. “You’re going to say yes anyway so why not just say yes right at the start? Don’t you *trust* me?” She made puppy dog eyes.

“Does it have to do with beasts?”

“Mayyyyyybe?” she drawled, trying not to grin too widely.

She sighed, but she was starting to grin too. “Fine, I suppose I can’t have you running around out there getting all the beasts on your side. When do we leave?”

“As soon as I get some dinner. Is your homework done?”

“What? No? I don’t know? Maybe?”

“No beasts for you. If, you know, that’s what this is, and I’m not saying it is. Nope, not saying that at all. Too bad.”

“Homework can wait!”

“Don’t let a professor hear you say that, they might faint dead away. It’s fine, it shouldn’t take long. What’s good tonight?” She looked over her choices.

It had been a long week. As far as Aerith could tell the drills she had found had not moved. Some sort of manhunt had been going on by the ministry but there were no results yet. Gangs roaming the countryside had been successfully discouraged, so they weren’t bothering the goblins (as much) anymore. But San was adamant about not letting her near the forth trial, and said there wasn’t much that would change his mind. So that was a sticking point but on his two dimensional head if Ranrok found whatever he was looking for. Aerith just went to classes, having a full week without doing much more than exploring the castle some more, homework, and hanging out with her roommates and friends. She had gotten a nice thank you card from Mrs. Rabe and more money had come in from the sale of the short skirts (which were popping up more and more) and auctions though Mr Pinkfeather. He had written a second letter saying the betting offer was off, given the news in the papers about the place being shut down. She made sure to save that one, so she could frame it or something later.

Now stuffed and on a broom beside Poppy, hovering over the castle, she felt she could tell her friend what they were doing out there.

“So Deek tells me he’s ‘seen’ a phoenix out in the wild in the nearby area, and requested we go look into it. I have no idea how he’s seen anything as he doesn’t leave the Room except for very short periods but when I asked about that he just said that elves have ways in a very mysterious way. But whatever. He pointed me in the direction, and I figure with my greater revelio from the air it shouldn’t

be too hard to find. So that's why I didn't want to mention it in the castle. If you're not interested though, you can always--"

"I'm interested!" she interrupted. "A phoenix? I've never seen one, only drawings. What are we still sitting here for?"

"That's what I thought. Let's go." She leaned forward and both brooms started moving.

They didn't have to fly for long to reach the area he had shown her on the map, and she cast, updating it. Hanging there in the air she opened the book and Poppy flew close to help steady her. "Yes, there's a paw print, and it's labeled as a phoenix nest. It should be around here somewhere."

"It would be somewhere very high up, but protected," Poppy told her. "Let's look around for something like that."

"Right."

The swooped down and around the mountainside near the marking on the map, and it wasn't long before Poppy spotted a nice tree in a hole in the mountain and the two girls landed. Something in the tree squawked, and a bird's head popped out of the leaves.

"Oh my gosh, we found it," Poppy announced, clearly not believing her eyes.

"Now we just have to convince it to come with us. Or put it in the sack," Aerith told her, carefully setting the broom down. She held an arm out and went down on one knee. "Greetings, Phoenix! Can I call you Phil? Nixxy? Onix? Phoebe?"

"At least make it some kind of fire name, like Hotfeathers or Firefriend," Poppy muttered.

"Hotfeathers?" Aerith looked over at her friend, and even the phoenix seemed to be miffed, tilting its head and looking at her with one eye.

"What? I'm really excited and not thinking straight it's a freaking phoenix do you even know? You don't even know. I don't even know!"

"Know what?"

"You know? All of it?"

"Sure, all of it. Anyway, oh great phoenix! We are here to take you to safety, if you so desire it. I'm sure you can take care of yourself, but there are poachers around here and given how much we've absolutely *kicked their teeth in* lately, they might be after shall we say more rare and radiant 'treasures' such as yourself. I am Aerith, wielder of ancient magics and this is my companion, Poppy, loved by all creatures. Even the yucky ones like spiders. She has saved many a beast from a cruel fate even as a little girl. I count her among my greatest friends."

"Aw, Aerith! Don't make me blush in front of the phoenix."

"What it's true," she whispered back. "They're coming out, don't spoil it. Where was I? We have a Room in the castle where you can be safe, for a time, until the danger of the poachers is over. I will not force you. But I will plead with you, come with us. Be safe with us. Upon my honor, and by my magic, I swear we mean you no harm and when the time is right you will be returned to the green to continue your life."

"He's actually considering it," Poppy whispered. "He's looking right at us. It's said they're very intelligent but this one really looks like he's weighing us in his mind."

"At least he's not considering eating us, we're way too big. Should we bring Highwing here, maybe they can have a chat and he can put in a good word for us?"

"I didn't know I needed *references* to rescue a- what's it doing?"

The phoenix spread its wings wide, but upwards, and a circle of light flashed around the two girls. Mystical symbols rotated and turned upon the ground, covering the whole area.

"This isn't in the lore!" Poppy screamed, as suddenly there was a bright light all around them. Aerith threw her arm over her eyes and when she dared to look again, the mountaintop was gone. She was standing in a white space, in a ring of fire, Poppy behind her and the phoenix hovering there before them. It wasn't moving its wings.

"My name, for the record, is Fawkes," it said. "Nice to meet you, Aerith and Poppy. Let's talk."

Poppy fainted dead away.

“Oh dear. That’s why I don’t usually do this, you know?” Fawkes sighed. “At least you seem to be made of slightly sturdier stuff. So you want to rescue me, is that it?”

“Uh, yes? But I guess you don’t... You can talk? Was that magic? What’s going on here? Is she okay?”

“She’ll be fine. Seeing an angelic creature such as myself for what I truly am does have that effect on people. But you. You were lying when you said that bit about ancient magics?”

“No, of course not. Angelic creature?” Aerith looked Fawkes over, and he was a bit “brighter” or maybe “more solid” than he had been before. *Something* about him had changed, his colors were deeper, and there seemed to be more of them than before in his feathers, too.

“Of course. Oh sure, your kind thinks us terrestrial, but we’re not. One of the only divine creatures to regularly come to the lower plains, you know. So, wild magic is loose in the world again, is it? And after so short a time, too! Interesting.”

“Wild? Short? It’s been hundreds of years!”

“Bah! That’s nothing, to an immortal creature such as myself. And what, pray tell, have you been doing with it? Last practitioner I knew about that could use it met a fairly gruesome end.”

*Will the forth trial show that? Ugh, gruesome end, did Isidora get her head exploded or something trying to take too much negative emotion out of someone?* “Making gateways and cylinders out of nothing. I used them to build a sanctuary for the forest, and trap people in a tent so the ministry could arrest them all before they could get away.” *Killed a guy, but maybe not bring that up?* “I’m only just learning, and I have no one to teach me.”

“You shouldn’t need it. If you have done this much you have felt the magic within you, and can thus direct its workings. Ah, I think I know of what you speak, I’ve flown over it. That’s your work, eh? Interesting thing to think of, I might approve it. Still, I suppose one way or another that’s a good start. And now you come to me...”

“An elf told me I should.”

“Ah. Tragic creatures, elves. Still being punished for their long ago rebellion, I take it?”

“What?” *Talking to this guy is very confusing!*

“Can they not be themselves? Do they still hide the full range of their abilities?”

“Yes to both?”

“Pity. You do seem sincere. But you also just came in from above. I would have rather you entered from below, I had a whole obstacle course set up down there. Even some fake poachers, to see what you would do to them in order to get to me. I didn’t expect you from the air. My fault, I guess.”

“Fake poachers?”

“Oh yes. My magic is a bit different from yours, as you might have guessed. It can do things yours can’t. Well, maybe not yours, specifically. But most wizards of the age anyway.”

“I... Okay. I feel like I would maybe like to talk with you for hours and hours?” *Is he really immortal? From Heaven? Heaven exists? What magics does he know, can he help me? All of us? Why does he hide his true nature?*

He laughed. “Not possible, I’m afraid. You seem genuine though, and maybe I should start keeping an eye on the school a bit more. Maybe find a young headmaster to hang around? Not the current one, I know all about *that* one. But maybe a nicer one that just needs a bit of guidance? I’ll allow you to rescue me, I just hope you were truthful in what you said.”

“I was. But obviously that’s no longer a concern? I know you for who you are now, obviously-”

He shook his head. “Sorry, you won’t really remember this. Not when you *wake up*.”

The girls blinked, had something just happened?

“Oh, look!” Poppy exclaimed happily. The phoenix was on Aerith’s arm, stepping sideways to climb up to her shoulder.

“Fawkes?” she asked, tentatively.

“...” replied Fawkes.

“Fawkes? Where did you get that name from?” Poppy asked.

“I don’t... know. A dream? I can’t remember. Did you? No, it’s nothing. I guess he’s coming with us. Angelic bird?”

“You mean like Heaven?”

“I can almost- it’s gone. Something important...”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Let’s... Let’s just go.”

“Well, nice to meet you Fawkes!” Poppy told him. “Hope you like food pellets!”

*Not particularly,* was his thought.

Fawkes flew under his own power next to the girls, and took to her shoulder again when she landed. For a wonder, Professor Wesley was there to meet them.

“Professor?” Aerith asked, hopping off her broom.

“He was right. You did come back with- never mind that,” she pressed on.

*Never mind the phoenix? Sure, okay? And who was right? Deek? Is he hiding what he can do? Where did that thought come from? Elves? Punishment? It’s slipping away...*

“You must come with me to the forest. The centaurs have finally decided to confront us about the sanctuary, and you must be the one to explain it. If they request you take it down, then you must do so. We will not risk further antagonizing them. We will simply have to find another way to protect the beasts that live there.”

“A phoenix and centaurs in one night?” Poppy gasped. “Best. Night. Ever!”

“Yes, I suppose it would be, for you. Come along.” She headed in a forestward direction.

*Right, it’s just a huge hassle and headache for Professor Weasley.*

At the edge of the forest a large group was gathered, perking up at their arrival and not looking happy about it.

“They’re so dreamy,” Poppy muttered.

*They do all have huge arms, and those muscles on their stomachs. Maybe from balancing their more ‘human’ parts atop the more ‘horse’ parts? How did they even come to be, anyway?*

“So, you finally come forward with the one that made this so called sanctuary in our forest,” said the one in the lead. “Which one is it?”

“Elek, this is Aerith,” she introduced. “She’s the one that created the sanctuary.”

“A mere girl? What trickery is- what is that?” He pointed to the phoenix.

“It’s a phoenix,” she started to explain.

“I know what a phoenix is, human child. What is it doing there, upon your shoulder?”

“I was taking it to safety, but I was interrupted by needing to come to this meeting. So it’s accompanying me for the moment. His name is Fawkes.” Something was still in the back of her mind. “Even if you don’t respect me, show a little respect for him!”

He actually took a step back, which was quite satisfying to see. “No, no, this cannot be!”

*And that’s the face of a man trying very, very hard to hold on to a very big ball of hatred. Or pain? Maybe Isidora was right, could I take his pain? Bad thought Aerith. Do you want another Keepers situation? No, you do not.* “I assure you, it is. I’m not tricking you.”

“No, impossible!”

The others started muttering among themselves.

“You doubt your senses?”

“Clearly, there is more to this girl than we first thought,” said another centaur, stepping up beside Elek. “I am Dorran. Let us discuss this recent development and remain of open mind. Firstly the original reason why we have gathered. Wand users have claimed the structure in the forest is for the protection of the creatures that live there. Is this true?”

“Yes. I made it so that animals could have a place free from the worry of poachers killing them. I picked an area with large trees, easy access to water, and with a nice cave system for the more shy of beasts. We have the edge lined with detection devices and as I understand it, after a few times testing those defenses and being run off, the poachers have decided to leave it alone. There is an entrance to the dome in the castle, and if you can guard another I’ll be happy to make one you can use. As for the poachers themselves; We recently dealt them a blow, putting an end to a dragon fight that was going on in the nearby area, and the ministry is trying to process everyone they caught. But that will still take time. Once I’m assured the greater threat is over, or should I say the organized threat, as there will always be some poachers I fear, the dome can come down. Does that satisfy?”

“I am satisfied,” Dorran agreed.

“I am not,” Elek put in.

Dorran rolled his eyes a bit and turned to him. “What other evidence do you need? A sun herald has chosen her. Even if only temporarily, this holy messenger allows himself to be carried by this human. Have you experienced such a boon? Perhaps the holy one wishes to prove your argument against the young human and fly to your side instead? Shall we await this event a moment?”

*Holy one? Why does that seem like something I should have already known? Sun herald? What are they talking about?* Everyone looked to the phoenix, who seemed quite content where he was.

“We have our answer it seems,” he went on. “Is your hatred truly so deep?”

“They cannot be trusted. But I am not unfeeling,” Elek decided. “If they can perform some other action that is of value to the forest then I shall retract all complaints.”

“Value to the forest? What does that mean?” Poppy asked.

He smirked at her. “You are all wand users, you think yourselves better than us. You figure it out.”

*I am better than you. I don’t run around crapping in the woods. I’m part of a civilization and culture that invents things, tries to better itself.*

He turned and rushed off, most of the others following him.

“I’m not sure what he would accept,” Dorran admitted. “Think on it? I can meet you here in three days time, to discuss your plans if you would like my help.”

“I would be greatly honored,” Aerith told him. “We both would, if you don’t mind my friend joining me. There’s only one phoenix, but I’m sure he would have just as easily chosen her if-”

Fawkes hopped off Aerith and onto Poppy, who threatened to pass out again from the look of delight and utter terror (it was a complex look) on her face. A very high squealing sound came out of her mouth, but no more.

The centaur gave a hearty laugh and nodded. “Both are welcome. I will see you in three days hence.” He too took off.

Professor Fig slumped a little bit. “That could have gone worse I suppose,” she admitted.

“I didn’t do anything wrong, did I?” Aerith asked.

Poppy was pointing to Fawkes and her face now said “do you see what’s happening right now?” Aerith shook her head with a snort. *I’m not jealous. I’m not.*

“No,” Professor Fig told her kindly. “Though it was good timing, Deek telling us about this... Fawkes, did you say?”

“That’s right. Almost too good, would you say, if pressed?” *Something about elves, what was it?* She eyed Fawkes from the corner of her eyes but he was playing it super cool at the moment.

She nodded. "That is the way of elves. They can be quite insightful, when they need to be. But enough of that. Secure your new friend in the Room, and get to bed, both of you. If you want my help coming up with something to impress our angry centaur friend let me know. I have no idea off the top of my head what could work but we can figure out something."

"Thank you, professor," Aerith told her. "Let's go see your new place, Fawkes."

## Chapter 42

For the moon

When: Wednesday afternoon

Where: Main hall

The girls hadn't had any revelations for things they could do to benefit the forest on Tuesday, but at least the phoenix seemed to be making himself at home in the Room. He had flown all around, even perching on Deek's shoulder for a bit but as they were about the same size he couldn't really keep that up. She had been writing things down as she came up with them but it was a fairly short list even after a day and a half.

*Percival made it rain, so I know my magic can do that. But the forest has plenty of water. I could probably manage to dome up the entire thing, with doors all along the edge to keep out the curious but that might be taken as imprisoning them by the centaurs. Growing more trees? Seems to be a lot of them in there. I mean really, what do they want from me?*

"I have an idea," Poppy told her, a moment after an owl delivered a letter to her.

"Do tell!"

"I wrote my Gran for ideas, and she came back with something. Do you know what snidgets are?"

She shook her head. "Can't say that I do."

"I'm not surprised. They were hunted to extinction a long time ago. It's the worst sort of thing to be, for a creature. Useful to wizards, I mean. So useful they were hunted as potion ingredients and such and before anyone knew it, they were all gone."

"Thanks Poppy, can always count on you to bring me down?"

"It is terrible, but I tell you this for a reason, silly. Apparently, according to my Gran, there was an organization dedicated to preserving endangered species that vanished around the same time. She reckons we should look for one of their hideouts and see if any eggs were overlooked or placed into protective charms."

Aerith blinked a few times. "You know, I was just joking about bringing back an extinct species. Are you saying we may be able to do exactly that?"

"Don't get your hopes up too far. It's a long shot this group, which collapsed under mysterious circumstances, had any eggs at all. And charmed them to remain viable until now. And we can find one of their hideouts. But if we could..."

"That would be of great service to the forest! If there were enough to repopulate the species, anyway. Of course we would have to watch them, make sure there was a large enough population to release. Get the ministry involved so they don't just start getting hunted again and all our work is for nothing. But that's putting the cart before the horse. Does she have any idea where a nearby secret hideout is?"

"Only clues. Basically a path laid down by the organization for perspective members. When the group was active they didn't actually go looking for people to join. They put clues out into the world and perspective members came to them. This proved they were dedicated enough to care for the creatures they placed under their protection."

*Oh, a sort of trial. Interesting. Why does that sound so familiar? Can't place it. Nope. Seems too logical.* "Do we have any kind of starting point?"

“Something about the answer lying in moonlight. But that’s awfully vague.”

“No kidding. Perhaps the centaurs will know more? We still have tomorrow to think of something else. But at least we have the beginnings of a plan. Good job, Poppy.”

“Thank my Gran, not me. You should come meet her sometime, I bet she would be thrilled to meet... one of my friends.”

“I’d love to meet her too. Once this situation is over, okay?”

“Deal!”

The two didn’t think of much else to impress the centaurs, and they presented themselves at the edge of the forest at the correct time. Dorrان was there, and they showed him the notes Poppy’s grandmother had sent her. He seemed thoughtful.

“So, you wish to walk the path of the preservers, eh?” he mused. “That name has even been lost to us, but I have read the old texts. I have seen how the new and the old move the stars. Back when wizards and centaurs were more aligned in purpose. Yes, could it be? I will set you on the path, if you choose to walk it?”

“We would walk it anyway,” Poppy insisted. “Even if that other centaur, what was his name? Erik?”

“Elek,” Dorrان corrected.

“Right, Elek. Even if he hadn’t commanded we do even more for the forest. This is just too important.”

“We are agreed. Come. I shall escort you to your first destination, and speak of what you must do there. Just in case Elek gets any ideas about going back on his word. I don’t think even his hatred is great enough to do that, but better safe than sorry.”

“Let’s go!”

So the three walked the forest and Dorrان spoke of what was to come. “The first step does involve moonlight, as you have said. But we cannot wait, and so an artificial means must be substituted. To that end, you shall retrieve a moonstone. Once in hand I can take you to the place it will need to go. There the next step on your journey will be revealed to you.”

“Wonderful, thank you Dorrان,” Poppy told him.

“Of course. I look forward to taking this journey with you.”

*Does he know more than he’s letting on? Does he know the location of an old site and is making us walk this path as did those of old? I suppose it’s fine but it’s pretty annoying. On the other hoof, he doesn’t know us, and is probably using this opportunity to simply observe us and see if we’re on the level.*

They finally made it to the cave, a nice enough place with some pools of water, and many rocks stuck into the ground. Many were taller than Poppy (which wasn’t hard) and Aerith (who wasn’t all that much taller) and were carved with various symbols. Many looked placed, with some balancing on top of others nearby. The cave entrance had about twenty candles around it, and the stone nearest the entrance was even more elaborate than the others. It had a golden circle near the bottom with a funny shape carved into it, and higher up an even bigger shape like a ribbon folded over at the corners and going back on itself. There was a circle in the middle and you could put your arm right through it, if you could reach that high anyway.

“Someone put a lot of work into the entrance to this cave,” Aerith remarked, looking the entrance over. “You don’t think any of this stonework is a clue to something further into the cave do you?”

“Hard to say. Best look it all over and try to remember it though,” Poppy agreed.

“I will stand guard out here. Hopefully it will not take you long,” Dorrان told them.

“You’re not coming?” Poppy asked.

“We don’t take to caves very well,” he admitted with a smile, shaking a hoof at them. “Even the forest is a stretch, can’t do a lot of galloping in a forest. The plains are the original home of the centaur.”

“That makes sense. See you when we get back. Let’s go.”

They spent a few minutes checking each stone and descended into the cave. For a wonder almost immediately they saw what could be a dried out fountain, now full of dirt and grass, as there was a hole in the ceiling letting in sunlight. At least it would, the sun was setting now as it was after school, after all. Aerith busied herself looting the next chamber, that had various vases haphazardly strewn about. They then had to blast a crumbling door out of the way, which led further down, and both girls stopped and stared in amazement. Plants of all kinds grew here in the light, covering both the floor and the walls, as the ceiling here was cracked open and crumbling. It really was quite pretty, and clearly no one had been here for some time. Wild flowers of every kind grew here, in patches, and they carefully made their way through without stepping on any.

“Whoever made this place was absolutely obsessed with vases and urns,” Aerith proclaimed, gathering up another six along the walls. “It’s crazy.”

“What could this place have been used for in the beginning?” Poppy asked. “There’s no rhyme or reason to having all these vases here. It’s just stone walls, this wasn’t a meeting place. It’s odd, why did they do all that work on the stones outside?”

“Maybe answers further in.”

They moved on, it was more of the same. Empty chambers, full of grass and flowers. Finally they came to something interesting. A door with metal bars across it, designs on the walls, and on either side of the door, something a bit familiar to Aerith.

“This looks like the same sort of thing as in the mermaid cave!” she exclaimed. “Look at this moth design, Poppy. I went into a cave where I had to gather moths using a light spell- well, I say moths, but they were more magically enchanted keys that looked like moths and flew around. But this is a big one.”

“You think it has something to do with opening that passageway?”

“Probably. We’re not going to waste time though. I’ll just make a gateway as I can see the other side perfectly fine.” She cast, making a doorway on each side of the gate.

Poppy laughed. “They didn’t consider you when making this, did they?”

“Nope. But honestly, we could have probably smashed the bars apart in a pinch. I just hate to wreck this place. We may want to put the stone back for the next people that want to join the group.”

*Humm, of course if we do that, we have to make sure there is a real solution and not my cheating solution. But we can do that sometime later.*

“But the group doesn’t exist anymore!”

“Doesn’t it, Poppy? Doesn’t it?” She indicated herself and Poppy, wiggling her eyebrows.

“You mean- you think we should? Start it up again?”

“Why not? Or do you not want to protect beasts- oof!” Poppy pounce tackled her, giving her a hug.

“That’s a great idea! Our own secret society! You’re the best!”

“Naturally,” she laughed. “Come on, we don’t have the moonstone yet.”

“Right, onward! To glory! To victory! To protecting beasts from the shadows!”

*That mechanism still bothers me. Were merfolk involved here, once? Was this underwater at some point? Why moths? And what was the real solution back there? Or did this group make the cave too, for some reason now lost to history?*

The next room had several of those odd moth shaped devices strewn about, but Aerith was more concerned with the gap that existed between where they were, and where they wanted to be over there. With a shrug she pointed her wand again, causing a bridge to rapidly span the gap.

"You're a handy person to have around," Poppy remarked.

"You can get the next one," she told her. *I'll dissolve this on the way out, again so that whoever comes later can solve the issue in their own way.*

"I will then!" she insisted. "Look at this place though. More flowers, and even a waterfall. I bet you could swim down there!"

"It is a nice place. I wonder if they blew the holes in the roof to let the light in or if this place is just falling apart? I don't see any rubble though. Oh."

"Oh is right," Poppy agreed. They were now looking at a metal door with three moth shapes on it. "Is this familiar to you?"

"It's exactly the same!" she insisted. "I don't believe this. How can this same door be here? Who made it? I mean obviously this one is to keep us from going further but the one in the cave... doesn't make sense. It was a bare room beyond."

"Could it have been some kind of safe?" Poppy asked.

"Safe? No. The 'keys' if you will were all right there. It was the work of moments to open it up. You don't build a vault door and hang the key next to it. But what other purpose could it serve?"

"So we need these keys you spoke of?"

"Yeah. Thank goodness I know the place well." She cast again, creating a doorway into the cave, and the two girls stepped through.

"And where are we right now?" Poppy asked.

"Jump in that pool, swim through the tunnel, and you'll be down near the docks at the castle."

"Wow. Oh yeah, here's the door. And the three moths, you were right. Can we get them out again?"

"The door must close. Stand back." She pulled the door shut and the moths animated, allowing the girls to gather them up, and open the second door by slotting them inside.

"I'll leave this gateway for now," she decided. "Put them back there later. Maybe this is really step two or three, and someone walking this path was expected to have some? Or there's a side passage we missed? Clearly they didn't expect someone to do what I did to open this door."

"Clearly," Poppy agreed. "It's open now though, let's see what's next."

"This is the one you're going to get, right?"

"Hey, I helped. I put two of the moths in the door, you only did one!"

"Oh okay," she agreed. "That's fair."

"More than fair," she said with a giggle.

They both giggled and moved on.

The next room had a stone circle placed into the middle, and a ring of stone had been placed around that. While there were some carvings on the walls, the room was otherwise empty.

"Some kind of ceremonial space?" Poppy guessed. "That's too regular a circle to be natural. It was placed here for some reason but I can't figure out what."

"Yeah, no other clues here. What's that?"

That was a bunch of reptilian shapes floating around the body of water across the room. They looked the place over, and it seemed to be a dead end. Apart from the swirling vortex of water that was past them, that is.

"You can swim, can't you?" Aerith asked.

"I can. But do you really think that's wise?"

"No," she admitted, looking down at her book. "But what else do we have? Clearly we are meant to perform a 'dive of faith' so to speak. Same as the mermaid cave, in that respect. Very odd parallels here, they must have some connection."

"Maybe. But I'm the only one that can go," she mused sadly. "We can't get your book wet."

“There’s a solution to everything. Come on.” She went back the way they had come, through the portal to the cave, and started taking off the belt.

“Of course,” breathed Poppy. “No one will come *here*. It’s perfectly safe to leave your stuff. What are you doing now?”

“Taking my clothes off. I’m not swimming in my school robes. Come on, take it off, we don’t have all night.”

“I’m not Nerida! That girl seems to have clothes off more than she has them on!”

“Up to you, of course. Don’t blame me if you drown in that heavy robe though.”

Poppy looked a bit panicked for a moment, but sighed and started taking her stuff off.

“That’s the way!” Aerith cheered. “Take it all off!”

“Stop it! You’re terrible!”

“I know.”

“And don’t stare!”

“Oh you’re right. I should be helping!” She grabbed for Poppy’s skirt.

“That’s not what I meant!” she shrieked.

“Hold on,” Poppy told her as the two walked back. “Why didn’t we just leave the book by the pond in there? No one is coming in after us anyway, it didn’t matter where we left it.”

“Maybe I just wanted to make you walk around naked, check out that cute butt of yours?”

“You’re impossible! I don’t know why I asked.”

Aerith sighed. “That’s the trouble. You tell somebody the truth and they just don’t believe you.”

A moment later the two girls were splashing in the shallows to attract the attention of the swimming beasts, who came to investigate. They got frozen with ice spells, immobilizing them, so the girls could swim past and into the vortex. Naturally Aerith had created a return point walking back to the chamber with her now naked friend. If they did run into trouble, they could try something else. What the something else was she had no idea, it was a dead end here, but maybe something would come out of it. She needn’t have worried. They surfaced soon enough, and stared in awe at the place they had just discovered. The tree, up a path that spiraled around it, was beautiful. Silvery leaves gently swayed in the breeze brought in from the once again ruined ceiling, and colorful birds of all kinds flew around it, disturbed by the two humans appearing out of nowhere.

“What kind of tree is that?” Aerith said in a hushed voice.

“I have no idea,” Poppy admitted. “I’m a beast girl, not a plant girl. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen though.”

“Yeah. Come on, the stone must be around here somewhere.”

They found the stone stuck in the tree itself, and had to yank it out of there. In the dim light of the cave it really did seem to be glowing with moonlight, and the two smiled at each other. But then Poppy looked concerned. “How do we swim back through the passage without dropping it?”

“I’ll just make a gateway to take us back. Actually...” She pointed her wand and stepped through to her dorm room to grab a couple of towels so they could dry off, then went back and got dressed. She dissolved the bridge, made sure her gateways were closed, and made one more to the entrance to the cave again. Dorrان was there, looking pleased, as they emerged holding the stone.

“Good. Now we can place the stone and see what the next step of our journey is. Come, follow me.”

## Chapter 43

Sudden but Inevitable

When: Wednesday evening

Where: The forest someplace

Dorran once again took the lead, taking them through the forest in exactly the way a person who knew exactly where they were going would do it. This further cemented Aerith's suspicions that the old centaur knew their final destination well, and was really just testing them a bit. She didn't mind, human kind hadn't been kind to the centaurs of late, so he was right to at least be somewhat wary. They arrived at a clearing, surrounded by stone hills, and decorative stones had been placed in a pattern into the ground. They too towered over the girls, who looked them over.

"The carvings are similar to the ones we saw on the stones outside the cave," Poppy realized. "The two places are connected. But what do we do now?"

"What does the area suggest?" Dorran asked, sweeping a hand over the whole place.

"There's a hole here in this central stone, looks about right to place the moonstone in," Aerith decided. "Let's do that?"

"Sure, why not?" Poppy agreed.

Aerith got the stone out, and popped it into the side of the rock. This seemed to activate some kind of magic, as the rock itself started to glow in a pattern up to the top.

"What in the world?" Aerith managed. "What kind of magic is this?"

"Look, look!" Poppy almost squealed, tugging Aerith's sleeve. She turned to look where Poppy was pointing, and a large eyed creature stared back at them. "Mooncalf."

"Perhaps it's meant to lead us somewhere- and there it goes." It ran off, but was quickly joined by another, and another. They leapt and pranced around the area, leaving a strange trail behind in glowing mushrooms. The girls stood, hardly daring to breathe as the cute little creatures performed their ritual. And then it was over and they were gone. Only the glowing trails of mushrooms remained.

"That. Was. Amazing!" Poppy exclaimed.

"I agree," Aerith told her. But she was rubbing her chin thoughtfully. "Not sure how it gets us closer to finding the hideout of the protectors though."

"Every 'clan' if you will-" Dorran told them, making both girls freak out for a second for go for their wands.

"Don't scare us like that!" Poppy chided him.

He chuckled. "You really did forget I was here, didn't you?"

"Are you kidding? Centaurs are all well and good but this was a moonlight dance! I've ever only seen one in my life. I doubt my Gran has even seen two. Do you know lucky we are?"

"Indeed I do," he answered, eyes twinkling. "And my heart is gladdened to know you do, as well. But back to what I was saying. Each group of mooncalves has a unique dance, learned from one generation to the next. What does this suggest to you?"

The girls looked around, puzzled, and Poppy had Aerith grab her broom out and took to the sky. "It's a design of some kind," she shouted down to them. "A unique design, they knew it would be around long after they were passed down at this spot. It must be a clue!"

"Indeed it must," Dorran agreed. "But where could it lead, I wonder?"

"Do you?" Aerith asked him seriously. "I have a feeling you actually know."

“Ahh! You are perceptive, young witch. Indeed I do. In the interest of time I will save you combing the forest looking for this particular pattern, as the perspective members once were required to. I am fairly certain you would be up to the task, but best not to keep Elek waiting. He is, perhaps not incorrectly, annoyed enough with your kind at the moment.”

“Very well.” She yanked the stone, making the rock it was sitting on power down again. *But I would really like to know what sort of spell made the rock do that, just because we put another, slightly glowing rock, inside it. Does it do that every full moon, and the indentation here is just to force the issue so you didn’t have to wait weeks and weeks when you were on the path?*

“I still want to copy it down,” Poppy told them, landing. “I’d love to see if we could see other dances, and compare the patterns to see if there might have been a ‘master’ pattern that all others were originally based on. Certain stylistic elements would show this for sure!”

Aerith took out some parchment from her book and handed it over, along with a quill. “Go for it.” *Now, see, if you could somehow bottle that enthusiasm and sell it to people before, say, history class, thus keeping them awake, you could make a fortune.*

Moments later they were moving again, Poppy excitedly telling them about the first moonlight dance she had seen. It was right after she met Highwing, but she seemed to be holding something back. She kept glancing at Dorran, and Aerith decided she would probably get the full story later, as there was clearly something she didn’t want him to know. He didn’t press her, and soon they came to a strange place, passing through an arch that had the design the mooncalves had traced carved into it. It was an old ruin, with crumbling walls and buildings like many Aerith had seen on her travels around the castle. But one area, the central area, seemed to still be in pristine condition. Poppy ran to it.

“Look, look,” she hissed. “The same design as on that rock before. The same hole where the moonstone goes. It must power something magical here, as well.”

“I think you’re right…” Aerith looked around. There were two strange pillars here on what seemed to be a track, and various symbols were carved onto the nearby hill and in metal on the ground. The pillars had some kind lens at the top of them in glass, and giving one an experimental shove made it smoothly move along the circular track it sat upon. “Let’s see what we have here.” She placed the stone, and it lit up the rock at the center, but also light started shining out of the lenses at the top of the pillars. But that wasn’t all. The symbols around the cave entrance also lit up, some more brightly than others.

The two quickly reasoned out that moving the pillars so the light that spilled out of them hit the same symbol on the ground that was lit up made other symbols glow, which they then lit up. After a sequence was done the cave entrance opened up, showing the interior.

“You coming this time?” Poppy asked. “Or is this just another stop on our journey?”

He smiled. “This is your final stop. Come, let us see what remains inside.”

“Now you’re talking.”

The three stepped inside, and quickly came to realize this was, indeed, their final destination of the night. While there were cages and such inside, the walls were covered with paintings of beasts, and there was a study with shelves of books and desks not far from the entrance.

“Ah, books!” Aerith crowed. “Now you’re talking my language. This place is great.”

“It could take us days to go through all this,” Poppy agreed. “There’s chests, and scrolls, drawers, and all sort of stuff left here. My goodness there’s even a huge fireplace! They really wanted this to be a comfortable place to work. Even live. *Why* did they leave? What happened to this group? If only these paintings could talk! Hello? Nothing, not magical.”

“That I do not know,” Dorran admitted. “Perhaps there will be a journal or some other record of events among the artifacts here.”

“As interesting as it would be, we’re here for bigger fish, or in this case smaller birds. Let’s keep going.”

They moved on, past that area, and their eyes got wider again. There was a whole courtyard area, open to the sky, where trees and plants were growing. Big trees. Like, really big. The place seemed to take up the entire hill they were inside, with balconies and windows up on even the third and fourth floors of the place.

“This is so weird,” breathed Poppy. “There’s place for hundreds to be here. How could such a group have just abandoned this place? And look, room for nests in these cubbies here and even some old nests still hold together. It’s crazy. No wait, I bet birds have come in here naturally from that hole and nested here. Neat.”

“Agreed,” Dorran said, troubled. “The beasts here were clearly not caged, these nests prove that. I begin to think those cages in the entrance were either taken from poachers and simply thrown there, or kept to isolate sick or hurt creatures while they recovered. Not to lock them away long term.”

“I think so too,” Poppy told him. “This place just feels so different from... Uh... other places I’ve seen. Look at these perches, many birds could use them all at once. They were free to come and go as they pleased.”

They kept going, opening doors and poking into corners. The place kept going, more trees and plants doing well here, and they found more books as well.

“How big is this place?” Poppy wondered. “I still feel like we’ve only seen a little bit of it! To throw all this work away, it’s crazy.”

“Look at this,” Aerith called. Set into the floor was a design of some kind, made of colored bits of tile that had been cemented together. “Someone really put a lot of work into this.”

“What do you think this huge chamber was for anyway?” Poppy asked, after looking the design over a moment.

“It will serve as a beautiful tomb for you,” said a voice, and from the shadows several figures stepped. Along with several centaurs, as well.

“Elek, what is the meaning of this?” Dorran roared.

“Yes, that is what I hope to determine,” he answered.

Meanwhile, the two girls drew their wands, as the men, in masks and fairly fine clothes, already had theirs out. Aerith looked the scene over, making a return point in case things went as she expected. *Don’t want to have to do all that again from this morning, after all.*

“What?” he asked, confused.

“Do not interfere,” Elek told him, coming over and standing beside him. He put his arm up, blocking him from moving. “This is between the humans now.”

“That’s right, you just let the *people* talk now, beasts,” the man agreed, stepping up to look the girls over.

“What do you want?” Poppy demanded.

“That’s up to you girls,” the one in the lead sneered. “You’ve got a choice to make, haven’t you? The centaur told us he would lead us to the one what put that dome up in the forest. So here’s the deal. We take you there. You bring the dome down. Then you get to walk away. We get the animals in the forest. We get whatever is in this place. You get to keep your lives. Simple, isn’t it?”

“I will never, *ever*, allow you to despoil this place,” Poppy growled, livid. “Leave. Or my friend and I will tear you apart.”

The men laughed. “There’s a dozen of us. What are the two of you going to do?”

“This,” Aerith announced, raising her wand. “Accio.” His wand flew out of his hand and she grabbed it out of the air. Before they could react she tossed it to the ground and stomped it, breaking it in half.

“Kill them!” the man shouted, backing away like a coward now that he was just a normal man in a world of magic.

The men moved.

In all fairness, the two girls were outmatched. They were outnumbered. The adult wizards before them should have known dozens more spells than they did, so they should also have been overpowered. But they were not. For some bizarre reason the men spread out and instead of simply stunning one of the girls, and then the other into unconsciousness with a dozen mass stupefy or worse, they attacked one at a time. Over and over, doing the exact same thing that got the last guy in trouble. They would cast a spell, their target would block it, and follow up with an accio. That wand would get broken and the next guy would step up. The process repeated six times for each girl, and after about thirty seconds the two girls stood over a dozen broken wands, holding a dozen sheepish poachers at wand point because really, what were they going to do about it?

And then the ministry people showed up.

“What’s going on here!?” the first man demanded. “Minors using all sorts of magic- what’s this?”

“I too would like to know what this is,” Dorran announced. “Elek? You brought these people here. Care to explain?”

“Centaurs? Kids? People in masks? What is this place? What is going on here? I want answers, and I want them now!”

“Never you mind, you don’t get it either,” Poppy told him. “We found it, it’s ours. These men attacked us. Take them away!”

“Now just a minute here,” said the guy. “This is all very irregular.”

“It was indeed my doing,” Elek admitted. “I lured these girls into a trap of my own making. I didn’t trust them. These men here are poachers from the forest. They are all guilty. I believed these two girls were with them and, if more of their kind showed up they would finally show their true colors. They would join with the poachers and turn on us, taking whatever is here for their own selfish aims. But it turned out I was wrong. They fought their own kind. I am... humbled, by what I have seen today.” He looked over to them. “You have my apologies.”

*Huh? I thought that was some kind of test or something. Fake poachers, and he would now reveal the wands were fake too. These are real poachers? How did we survive that? They didn’t work together at all, just politely waited their turn to be disarmed. It doesn’t make any sense.*

“We could have been killed!” Poppy yelled at him. “How could you?”

“Yes, I see now that not all humans-”

“Not all humans!” she yelled. “Don’t give me that. You could have watched us, like Dorran did. You could have chosen to trust us, given us a chance.”

Aerith put a hand on her shoulder. “He really couldn’t,” she offered softly. “He’s been burned too many times, haven’t you Elek?”

“In dealings with your kind? Yes,” he agreed. “I began to despair that none of you could be trusted.”

“That’s all great,” said the ministry guy. “But it still doesn’t answer the question of why I’m here.”

“They attacked us,” said the leader in the mask. “This is our place, they just came rushing in here and-”

The ministry guy laughed. “Is that what you’re going with? Okay, I’ve heard enough. You know I’ve seen that type of mask before, right? We recovered hundreds in boxes at the dragon fighting event. I know what it means. Gods you people are stupid, walking around announcing who you are to anyone with eyes. As for why you’re here trying to beat up a couple of kids I’ll be very glad to know, but we can discuss that later. Especially as it seems they completely trounced you, which honestly is just sad

for you. Turn around, hands above your heads, and kneel on the ground. We'll be taking you in to rot with the others in our cells."

Poppy grinned at Aerith, who nodded, but didn't smile back. They weren't out of it yet.

"As for you girls," said another agent, coming over to them. "You are underage, and using magic. Even if it was to defend yourselves, I'll still need to bring you in for a hearing."

"No, I don't think so," Elek told him, stepping up. "If anyone is to blame for this it is me. I will accept their punishment, as they would never have done magic if I hadn't brought those men here."

"Uh, I can't exactly arrest a centaur," he said with a nervous laugh, looking at the others. They were equally baffled and shrugged.

"Then as soon as the poachers are dealt with, you may leave," he announced. "These two did their magic in the forest. Our forest. It is not our intention to have them punished. That is the end of the matter, are we clear?"

"It's not, what?" He turned to the guy that was tapping him on the shoulder and they went into the corner to have a hushed conversation. Aerith caught words like "incident" and "relations" and "downhill" and "good will" and he came back over. "Fine," he spat. "We'll look the other way. Incidentally, some kids have been doing magic all around the area and getting away with it. I don't suppose that was you girls?"

"Not that you can prove," Poppy said haughtily.

Aerith glared at her, willing her not to say things guilty people would say. She didn't get it.

"Uh huh," said the agent. "Well, a lot of good has come from it, I guess, even if our cells are getting a bit overcrowded. So thank them, or whatever, I guess? I don't know, I'm just trying to do my job here, okay?" He spun and shouted to the others. "Get those people rounded up. Stupid centaurs. Stupid kids think they can get away with anything." He kept grumbling as he walked away, grabbed a guy, and vanished with him. Soon all the poachers were gone and the two were left with the centaurs.

"We're going to have to make some changes to this place," Poppy decided, sagging with relief they were not going to be arrested. "Those poachers have seen the place. We'll have to put anti-apparition charms in every room. Seal up the holes. Look into artificial sunlight spells so the plants don't die. Reset the door so we can get in easier. You've really made things difficult for us, you know that right?" she asked Elek.

"I do wish to make amends," he announced. "With your permission, I will station centaurs here, and get them cleaning the place up. Later, they can server as guards and helpers. Perhaps this can one day be looked upon as the start of a new trust between our peoples. If you wish to use this place as a hospital for creatures, or to hide endangered creatures away--"

"The snidgets!" she realized. "Are they really here? Come on!" She tore off down the hallway to the next area of the place. There was another huge tree here and there, surrounded by magical energy, were three golden eggs.

*Three eggs? Unless they're all from different mothers is that really enough? Even if they are, is that really enough? But I guess there could be magical ways to ensure the species survives. Ugh, I just hope it's not three males. But I guess with a fifty/fifty chance there's at least a decent chance for both.*

"I'm not sure breaking the spell is the best thing right now," Poppy decided. "They look like the eggs I would expect. But now that this place is compromised, we need to secure it and make sure we can defend them, if needed."

"You again show a rare wisdom," Elek told her. "I agree."

"Don't try to butter me up, Elek," Poppy told him. "I haven't forgiven you. Your little test could have gone much differently. If they had started winning, would you have taken our side and acted?"

"Of course!"

"Hummm. Fine. Keep your word to me and I'll consider the matter behind us. Dorrn, thank you for your help. You saved us a lot of time and running around, so hopefully we can work together and bring this society for the protection of downtrodden beasts back from the grave."

“I look forward to it.”

“We really have to get back. I’ll stop by tomorrow after class, see if there’s anything you need me to get you. I’ll help with starting to clean the place up and organize what we’ve found at that time.”

“I will await your arrival.”

“Very well. Aerith, if you don’t mind?”

“Not at all.” She cast, putting a door in the air that led back to the school. Poppy bowed once through it, and it closed again.

“WE RESCUED SNIDGETS!” she yelled, unable to contain herself any longer. She started jumping in the air and grabbed Aerith’s hands. “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh!”

*There she is...*

Dear Diary,

I have some good news for once! Theopolis Harlow has been captured. It took the ministry weeks of effort, according to the papers that were delivered this morning, but he's finally behind bars. As are most of his followers. Those that were captured at the dragon fight fell all over themselves painting their involvement at minor at best, and giving up information on the man that led to his capture. (In order to get reduced sentences of course) They took his safe houses out one by one, until he finally had nowhere left to run. Natty is thrilled. But yet, somehow subdued, like she wished she could go up against the man in person? I would have said that was a bad idea, but after beating up the poachers at the protector's cave, maybe I'm wrong about that. I still can't get over how sloppy they were, and how uncoordinated the attack was. But it worked out for me, so it's all good.

Poppy has been on cloud nine these past two weeks as well. Visiting the headquarters of the newly reborn society, getting the place ready to hatch the snidgets at last. It will be our first of many, we hope, in terms of snidgets or other creatures that are rare, like phoenixes, or that just need a place to recover in peace. Though I still have the strangest feeling there's more to phoenixes than meets the eye. The centaurs that are now basically living there to protect the place have been very nice, and we've been blasting out walls to make rooms bigger for them. The place really is enormous, enough space for everybody, so it's still baffling how a group big enough to need a space that large could just vanish as if overnight. No clues left behind, sad to say. But back to the centaurs; There seems to be a rotation of some kind, almost as if Elek wants to make sure all the centaurs get a chance to meet some "good humans." We even met some of their kids, which was great. I hope things never go back to the way they were, with us not trusting each other. We even got to hear some of their lessons for the kids, they do "school" quite differently than we do, and maybe better than we do.

The ministry has made some trouble for us. They figured out who we were and have been sending us letters. At least they've been somewhat polite about the whole thing? It is just letters, rather than showing up in person and demanding we tell them everything. And we could use their resources, though all that gold I've been making from the skirts and the artifacts I've auctioned off has come in handy in getting the hideout back up to "code" as it were. Poppy absolutely doesn't want them taking the project over, as they'll just botch it (her words) but having the department of magical creatures on our side could be invaluable if we started noticing a disease taking hold of the forest beasts, for example. We've been negotiating with them over how much involvement is too much, while still getting their support when we need it. They seem open to the idea in principal, but not that a couple of kids could possibly be mature enough to be in charge of it. We offered Professor Howin as the "lead" until we're of age (like a year and a half, spare me) and can legally open business bank accounts and such, turning it into a real non-profit organization instead of just a bunch of people who like animals banding together in secret. Obviously we don't want poachers storming the place for rare beasts, but there's no reason to go wholly in the direction of a secret society. We just want to care for beasts, not take over the world! They're coming around to the idea, I think. Making us a sort of unofficial branch of the beasts department. We would have to submit proposals and budgets and all that sort of paperwork to get any hard cash, but otherwise they would just let us do our thing.

I've been reporting all this to the paintings, guilting them, if such a thing can be done to a painting, into talking. "Well, the centaurs said..." "We met another group of centaurs today..." "The ministry loved my idea for..." That sort of thing. I think it's working? San seems to be coming around, he's a big beasts guy himself it seems. Wants to see Professor Fig and I tomorrow after class. Maybe we can finally put this whole Keepers thing behind us!

## Chapter 43

Beginning- of the end  
When: Monday evening  
Where: The map room

“We have decided to trust you,” San told Aerith. “I will now give you the clue you will need to find the entrance to the final trial.”

“So not an *abundance* of trust,” Aerith retorted. “As I’m still jumping through hoops for you.”

“We are constrained in this, yes,” he replied. “Your clue is this. The entrance is to be found under a face of stone and tendrils.”

Aerith waited.

Everyone looked at everyone else.

“That’s it?” she finally asked. “That’s the clue you’re giving me?”

“That’s the clue. Good luck.”

“Insufferable... Painting!” Aerith spat, a fair distance down the corridor. “Ew, find a face or whatever. You only have to check *the entire freaking globe*.”

“Not to worry, I think I know a good spot that may fit the wording of that little riddle,” Professor Fig told her calmly. “They wouldn’t make you go that far out of the local area.”

“You do? Professor that’s great!” she exclaimed, mood changing in an instant. “Let’s get this thing done!”

And so the two stood below a stone face, having cleared out some plant life to reveal it. The face was high above them on the cliff, and there was a strange circle with paw prints pressed into it just before that.

“Ah, interesting,” Professor Fig mused. “If we are to take the clues here at *face* value, we must bring the creature that carving represents here, to stand upon the platform. That will open the way.”

“That’s what makes you *head* and shoulders above the rest,” Aerith told him. “But I think we’re a bit past that, don’t you? Glacius! Glacius! Glacius! Bombarda!” She blasted the stone that held the face up, taking out some frustrations in blasting and yanking the pieces away from the doorway that was revealed under it. She finally cleared enough of it that the two could fit through.

“That is one way to do it,” he agreed. “I wonder if we should start teaching an anger management course here at the school...”

“I’m managing my anger just fine, professor,” Aerith replied sweetly. “Very therapeutic, what I just did. Come on.”

Aerith blinked in surprise. There was no trial here, just a passageway and the pensieve. The last part of the key hovered above the bowl, and she took it, expecting something to jump out at her as she did. But nothing did. No statues of soldiers in sight.

“What, did they get lazy in the end?” she asked. “Not that I’m complaining but this was hardly a trial.”

“I think the trial was to find and bring a graphorn here,” Professor Fig told her.

“Disturb some poor beast that was just minding his own business? Not a chance. My way was the proper and only way to do this. So, shall we see what end Isidora met at the hands of the four? I bet it’ll be a display of compassion and understanding hitherto unseen by the four Keepers.”

“No need for sarcasm, now.”

“Agree to disagree. Here we go.”

And so the pair saw San’s memories. He went to the Morganac home and found Isidora’s father just sitting there, eyes glazed over. *When and how did that happen? Let me guess, they still didn’t help the poor fellow, did they?* He rushed back to the school, talked with Percival a moment, and the scene shifted. Suddenly the four Keepers were walking into a huge cavern somewhere. They passed a boy who they briefly looked at, but kept going.

*Uh, how did they know where to go? Isidora didn’t tell anyone where her secret emotion stash was, right? How did they get here? I feel I’m not getting a lot of the story here. Maybe one of the kids told them? She was using her magic on kids, like that one we just saw. That could have happened.*

The cave was pretty spectacular, showing that it wasn’t only Percival that had a flair for the dramatic. Metal supports twisted their way upwards, while lamps hung from the gloom above. And there was the prize, the floating ball of darkness and light that Isidora used to contain all the bad memories she took from people. (Or whatever it was she was doing. Honestly without taking their memories they would just think about whatever was making them sad and they would be sad again. So how she had originally thought this was a good solution was beyond her.) Isidora was there.

She didn’t really seem surprised to see them. Didn’t demand to know how they had found her secret place. Seemed to be confident while facing down four angry looking people twice her age. She maintained she was doing right, just as she had always done. Percival struck first, to his credit trying to get her wand away from her. She casually blocked it, as any third year student would do, and there was a brief scuffle. Brief because San just cast the killing curse at her, and she died without a whimper. The others looked horrified for a second or two, and then went back to indifference. The memory ended.

The pair stared at each other across the bowl, and straightened up.

“So they failed her at every level,” Aerith finally said. “From the time she was a child to the time they struck her down. No attempt at understanding. No attempt at guidance. Just do as we say or else. She picked or else.”

“That’s one way to view everything we’ve seen from them, yes,” he agreed.

“She was a *child*, professor. She just wanted to help her father. And rather than help the man, so all of this was unneeded, look at what they forced her into. Sickening.” She turned to go. “Let’s get this key, find the repository, and move it before Ranrok comes calling.”

“I suppose that’s all that’s left at this point.”

“Not a word,” Aerith said to the paintings as she passed them, entering the map room from the usual spacial door. She was fuming.

“I know what you have just seen may be disturbing-” San started to say.

“What did I just say?” she screamed. “You killed her! Really? There was no other option? How about accio and getting her wand while she was busy with the others? How about a Depulso so she slammed against something and dropped her wand? How about setting her wand on fire? How about trapping her inside a construct made by Percival? Nope. You tried one thing, then decided to throw lighting bolts or whatever at each other, because yeah, that’s real magical right there. And then you just decided, on your own, that the world was better off without her. She just wanted to help people! I am going to go have this key made. I am coming back here. I will enter the chamber, unlock it, and figure out how I’m going to move that stupid repository before Ranrok gets it. Then I’m sealing this chamber and I am never speaking to any of you ever again. Not... Not you Professor. You’re fine. I mean them. Let’s go.”

“Wait, please!” they pleaded. It fell upon deaf ears.

“Yes, I’m sure I can do something with all this,” Mr. Ollivander told them both. “May take awhile, you want to wait?”

“I’ll wait,” Aerith told him. “Thank you for your help.”

“Personally, I need a drink,” Professor Fig told her. “I’m going to the three broomsticks, I’ll be back in a bit, or come and get me when it’s ready.”

“That’s fine,” she told him. “See you soon.”

“Right.” He walked out and Mr. Ollivander got to work.

Aerith paced around the small shop as he worked, magical energies gathering and flashing in the back room. It took him over an hour but he finally handed her a box with a wand in it, saying it wasn’t a normal wand at all. It seemed to have a specific purpose, and she said she knew. She thanked him, paid him, and met Professor Fig on the way back.

“All set?” he asked.

“I have the key,” she told him. “Let’s finish this.”

“I agree,” he told her, seeming to try and hold back a smile. “Lead the way.”

She didn’t bother with the floo network, simply casting a gateway right there back to the map room. “Where is it?” she demanded. Percival sadly indicated behind her, and the map vanished, showing a set of stairs downward. “Of course,” she sighed. “Right under our feet. Where else.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it now, eh?” Professor Fig asked, bumping her with an elbow.

“No more puns, not in the mood,” she told him. *He seems awfully chipper. How much did he drink at the bar?*

The two descended. They didn’t speak, simply picking their way through the tunnels below the castle. They were mostly unadorned, simply carved out to make a path. It was so quiet, and they walked and walked, Aerith wondering how far exactly they had to go. But finally they beheld the treasure. Or at least the door to it. Two massive statues stood in front of it, and Aerith got out the key. As she got near the two activated, but holding it up they recognized her and stepped back, opening the door as they did. The chamber they stepped into was, of course, massive, because why would it be small? There was a narrow path to the sphere, and Aerith looked down, getting an idea for how to deal with the thing. “Let’s take a look at the stupid thing,” she told Professor Fig. “Then we can get rid of it.”

“You have a plan?”

“Yeah, tell you in a minute.” She walked over and looked up at the orb. “Hopefully taking it out of this holder thing they’ve got it in will make it stop floating. I doubt it floats on its own. But we can probably cancel that magic if we had to.”

“Tell me how you would destroy it though,” Professor Fig again asked. “It looks pretty sturdy.”

“I wouldn’t, exactly. We captured one of the goblin drills. So, we shrink it down and carry it in here. Point it downwards, and let it go. We may have to make the drill bigger, but I suppose if we can make it smaller that’s no problem either. It can run for hours, I expect, or at least go deep enough to melt. Then we roll the ball into the tunnel it dug. If you can cast really, really long range explosion spell that activates on contact we then just collapse the tunnel, burying it too deep for anyone to ever find it again.” As she had said this she had walked around the sphere, looking up at it. She came around the front again and her combat instincts screamed at her. She threw herself to the side as a bolt sizzled past her. “We’re under attack!” she shouted.

“Nah, just you,” Professor Fig told her. “Come out with your hands up, no funny business.”

“Funny- what the heck? Professor Fig? What are you doing?”

“You trusting little fool,” said the man who had taken Professor Fig’s shape. “Haven’t they taught you about polyjuice potion? Wonderful stuff.”

“Ranrok?”

“Oh.” The man paused. “Yes, that would have made a lot more sense now that I think about it. He could have drank the potion just as easily as I did. Wow, am I stupid or what? Don’t answer that.”

“I think I might anyway. Who are you?”

“The one this power rightfully belongs to. Victor Rookwood!”

“Power? What are you talking about?”

“This.” He tapped the sphere with his wand. “Don’t tell me they haven’t been telling you what this is? It’s power, raw, untapped magical might! Ripe for the taking, and it’ll make me the most powerful wizard on the planet!”

“You’re a loonie.”

“We’ll see who’s laughing in the end! Did you know we’re so deep now the charms on the castle don’t reach down here? Guess what it means that I can do?”

“Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“This.” He vanished.

There was a pause.

*So I do return to the past and warn Professor Fig? Is he dead? He must have gotten jumped when we went for that drink. They knew he was involved right at the start with the key and Miriam. So naturally they were watching him. And now he’s been replaced and-*

There was a popping sound, and “Professor Fig” and a goblin appeared in the chamber. The goblin had a wand.

“Ranrok, I presume?” Aerith asked him.

“The one and only. Look at this thing, it’s magnificent. Victor, you have finally proven your worth. Well done.”

“Thank you, Ranrok. I’ll cover the girl, you get the repository open.”

“If I could just take a second of your time,” Aerith asked, “what exactly do you think is going to happen when you open that? Are your forces really ready to take on the entire magical world? I doubt the pain you unleash by opening it will incapacitate us for long.”

“Do what?” he sneered. “I’m taking all the power in this repository for myself. I’ll then deal with wizardkind on my own terms, with a power they can’t hope to match.”

*Can one person, even a powerful one, stand against say a thousand massed wizard’s spells? I doubt it.* “Again, power? Just what do you think is in there?”

“I know what’s in there, whelp! And I will wait no longer to possess it!!” He pointed the wand and the sphere exploded. Ranrok laughed as energy swirled around him... For about a second. Then he started screaming. He lifted off the ground and dropped his wand. He started thrashing about, as darkness wormed its way into him. He frothed at the mouth. He thrashed some more. He died, ten seconds before all the darkness had a chance to enter him though it kept trying to stuff itself in. His body kept twisting and jerking despite the life having long left him. Finally he dropped to the ground.

“Er?” Victor managed. “What?”

“Not sure what you were expecting,” Aerith told him. “All that sphere contained was the negative energy taken from hundreds of people. The pain of losing a loved one. A favorite pet. An arm, for all I know. All the petty and genuine emotions pulled from those that came to her. And he wanted those... Why? I thought he was going to try turning them on us, as a distraction. But he just absorbed them. What a moron.”

“No, no, it’s impossible. The records all pointed to it being power. A weapon to use against enemies.”

“Not sure where you were getting your information from. It was pain, plain and simple. Why would Isidora leave a weapon unused? Are you stupid? He accepted it into himself and he felt all those people’s pain at once. It killed him. Well, solves my problem okay. So here’s the deal.” She stepped up to the man and put her wand against his head. He made no move to stop her. “I’m leaving. Professor Fig will show up within the hour at the school. Unharmd. Or I will spend the rest of my life tracking you down and making you pay. Byeeeeeeeee.”

She walked past the shell shocked Fig duplicate, still poking at Ranrok’s dead body. Naturally she grabbed the wand he had used, she suspected who it might belong to.

Climbing up the stairs she took one last look at the paintings, shook her head, and started walking out of the chamber. She changed her mind, almost turned back, thought better of it, took another step, ground her teeth together, and stalked back to them. “Okay, so, explain please?”

“What happened?” Percival asked, in the most achingly smug tone he could possibly muster.

“That wasn’t Professor Fig, someone replaced him. He went and got Ranrok. Who blasted the repository open and took all the negative emotion into himself. He died. It’s gone. It’s over. Why did he think it was some kind of power? I mean the memories sort of showed that but she got taken out by the killing curse just as easily as anyone else would. She wasn’t all that powerful, in the end, so what gives?”

“Our plan worked!” Niamh crowed. “Though not in exactly the way we expected.”

“Plan?” she asked, wondering if this wasn’t a bad idea after all.

“Indeed,” Percival took over. “We had to be sure whoever came after us was trustworthy. We’re not stupid, you know. All those memories you saw were doctored. They gave the impression that Isidora was taking more than just emotions from those she used her magic on. That she was getting more powerful because of it. That she was storing that extra power... for reasons. We never did come up with a good excuse for that but it worked out in the end. Rubbish, of course, but we needed to have something. We also implied the same in the ‘journals’ left by the goblin. Of course we found him. Of course we made sure he hadn’t written anything down. We modified his journals in case someone started on the path that way. Then we waited. Would the person that found the repository crack it open or further bury it? If they opened it, well, that’s a problem that solved itself. We couldn’t get rid of that emotion in our time, we theorized only someone taking it in *willingly* would be able to. And feeling that much emotion at once would kill anybody. So we... didn’t make someone do that. But a person in the future, seeking power, would destroy themselves. If they buried it further, they were worthy of the power and could continue using it. Simple, right?”

“So it was all a lie?”

“Not all. We emphasized certain parts, downplayed others, skipped details, edited parts. All very effective, watching you get angry at our callousness.”

“So did you really kill her in the chamber?”

“Ah, yes that part was real. She really did need to be stopped.”

“Did she though? Really?” She held up a hand. “Don’t answer, don’t care. So it’s over, then?”

“Indeed. There was an initial repository, a smaller one she used to prove the concept. We threw that one into the deepest part of the ocean. As I said, we’re not dumb. It’s beyond anyone’s reach now. Go and live your life to the fullest, and use your power not to mess with people’s emotions, but to build bridges to reach them- where are you going?”

“Byeeeeeeeeeeee.” She slammed the door shut behind her.

And so, a rather shocked Professor Fig showed up at the castle, wondering what the heck was going on, and got the story. He was rather upset there hadn’t been some sort of climactic battle under

the school but did admit the true “trial” being ‘should I open the repository or not’ made a lot more sense than what had come before. Would the goblins’ fervor die down now that their leader was dead? Only time would tell. But he did thank her for all her efforts, and asked her not to be too angry with the paintings, as there was probably *something* she could learn from them. She said she would think about it.

Aerith’s school year continued without incident. As Ranrok’s body was recovered by Victor and shown to his followers, along with the true story of his greed causing his own downfall, the movement died down to only the most loyal who now had no real means of challenging the wizard’s power. Another victory for the oppressors! Hurray! No one cared about house elves, poaching went back to normal levels so the sanctuary came down, and the beasts in the Room were released. Aerith made sure Anne was comfortable, and Sebastian was as good as his word studying healing, both magical and not, to one day rid her of pain once and for all one day. Aerith and Poppy worked closely on the society with the centaurs, even finding others at the school who loved beasts as much as they did. Membership grew, and with the two clearing out old ruins to sell the treasures within, had the society in the black for a good long time. Aerith finally had time to organize all the books she had been collecting, and went on to become a great witch. With her own clothing line, and she took up photography as well. The ministry, well, their ‘purge’ lasted a few years and then the usual people got into power once again and the whole thing started to go downhill to become the ministry we all know in love in Harry’s time. Because of course it did.

As for Victor, well, if there’s ever going to be a sequel, at least one of the bad guys from the first story has to be somewhere out there, plotting revenge. Right?