

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

BY G. NORMAN LIPPERT

LOVINGLY BASED UPON THE WORLDS AND
CHARACTERS OF J. K. ROWLING

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2. WINDS OF CHANGE

“First years!” Hagrid boomed, raising his lantern as always, and summoning the newest students to himself. James spied the half-giant easily over the heads of the disembarking students as they milled on the Hogsmeade platform, and the sight gladdened him. “First years, this way to th’ boats! Step lively now. Yer trunks will be taken direc’ly. Follow me an’ watch yer step.”

“I wish I could ride the boats again,” Lily commented wistfully from next to James. “So much better than the carriages, don’t you think?” The ever-present entourage of her friends cooed and agreed all around. James stepped away, not wishing to be seen in their company.

He was a seventh-year after all, and was expected to be above hanging out with a gaggle of middle-year girls. Beneath this, however (although he would never admit it aloud), he half-resented the easy popularity that his sister had cultivated over the past few years. She and her friends bubbled on, barely noticing his departure.

Rose was waiting in line for black carriages and the ride up to the castle. James joined her, waving to Ralph further down the line where he waited with some of his Slytherin mates. Ralph waved back sheepishly. He'd been acting a little strangely ever since they'd met on platform nine and three quarters.

"If I didn't know any better," James commented idly. "I'd say Ralph was up to something."

"Our Ralph?" Rose clarified, frowning and glancing aside. "Ralph Deedle? He's about as cunning as a mint humbug. I wouldn't count on it."

The carriage trip up to the castle was a familiar and splendid ride, with the sun just dipping behind the mountains and painting the clouds with watercolor pinks, purples and oranges. Against this panorama, Hogwarts castle loomed, seeming to lean back on its rocky perch, comfortable and welcoming. Its myriad windows glinted like golden coins flashing in the bottom of a pool. James found himself crammed into the carriage with Rose, Morgan Patonia, Ashley Doone, Graham Warton, and Joseph Torrance.

"Good summer, everybody?" Graham asked blandly, seeming merely to pass the time. James didn't answer. On his other side, Joseph Torrance brightened. "Went to the Hocus Brothers Circus when it came to Chudley. The levitating acrobats and juggling elephants are great, but Montague the performing dragon is best of all."

"What's he do?" Rose asked from the front seat. Before her, as always, James could just make out the skeletal shape of the thestral in its harness, trotting into the shadow of the castle.

"Oh, amazing things," Joseph enthused. "Aerial stunts through flying rings, breathing fire to light torches held in bears' mouths, balancing a whole team of dancers on its tail. It barely ate any of the

people in the audience, and only stomped one or two of the concession stands. But even that was just for show, I'm pretty sure."

"It's a dangerous thing, dragging dragons around the country these days," Morgan sniffed. "I hear the Ministry is cracking down on those sorts of events, what with all the weakened borders around magical places."

"I hope not!" Ashley Doone piped up next to Morgan. "I want to see that show when it comes to Diagon Alley this winter! No way *that's* not secure enough to host a magical circus."

James sighed to himself, impatient with the topic of magical security after his interview with Rita Skeeter. Deep down, he didn't believe things were as bad as the newspapers and tabloids made them out to be, although he had an inkling that this might be false hope. His dad didn't talk of it much, not because there wasn't anything to say, James suspected, but because he didn't want to worry his family. This was rather worrying in itself, of course, but it was a bland worry, without specifics, and easier to forget.

"Did you hear about Damian Damascus and Sabrina Hildegard?" Rose suddenly asked, turning on her seat to look at James and Graham. "They dated all summer and just announced their engagement to be married. Can you believe it? *Married!*"

"You're joking," Graham accused flatly.

Rose shook her head. "Not a bit. Saw the invitation myself. Came by post just a few days ago. It's horklump and hemlock themed."

Graham rolled his eyes grudgingly. "Well, that's definitely Damien and Sabrina."

"Not really all that surprising when you think about it," Morgan sighed. "I mean sure, Sabrina's got a few points on him in the beauty department, but they were like mortar and pestle all through school. I'm surprised it never occurred to them before that they were meant to be."

"But," James finally spoke up, "they're not old enough to be married! I mean, are they?"

Ashley shrugged. “They’re adults, now, at least technically. Damien’s started himself a nice little alchemical practice in Puddlemere, and Sabrina’s studying for her curse-breaker certification. Plenty of people get married young. It’s romantic, I think.”

James’ mind reeled at the idea. To him, Damien and Sabrina were still fellow mates and Gremlins, albeit graduated now. It didn’t seem possible that they were already so far along in their grown-up lives that they were making lifelong commitments and career choices.

Shortly, the conversation drifted on to other topics, including James’ interview with Rita Skeeter. He told them briefly about it, assuring them that it was no big deal, and would probably barely warrant a few inches on the back page of *the Daily Prophet*, which he sincerely hoped, but didn’t quite believe.

Soon enough the carriage squeaked to a halt in the main courtyard below the open front doors. James clambered out, along with the rest of the older students along the line of black carriages, and followed Graham and Ashley up the steps. Professor McGonagall stood watching next to the open doors, her face as imperious and grim as always, a parchment unrolled in her right hand. She peered at it critically, glancing up over her spectacles as the students passed, one by one.

“Mr. Potter,” she said briskly, flicking her gaze at him, then those with him. “Misses Patonia and Doone. And you, too, Mr. Warton. Please make your way to the antechamber behind the Great Hall, and be quick about it.”

“What,” Graham hesitated. “Are we in trouble already?”

“Not if you do as I say,” the professor answered curtly. “And you as well, Mr. Deedle.” She nodded to Ralph as he clumped up the steps to join them. “And no stopping at your tables along the way. I don’t want to see any biscuit crumbs on the floor of the antechamber when I arrive.” She eyed Ralph pointedly. “Now hurry on, and take any other seventh-years with you, should you see any.” With that she dismissed them, returning her attention to the parchment in her hand.

Rose looked mildly affronted. “Well then,” she huffed lightly. “Seventh-years only, it seems. See you later then, I guess.”

“I wonder what this is all about?” James muttered as they stepped into the shadow of the main entrance, heading toward the glow of the Great Hall and the clatter of gathering students.

“No idea,” Ralph shrugged. “Do you think she’d know if I ate a biscuit on the way, like? I’m dead starved.”

“I wouldn’t risk it if it was me and my house on the line,” Graham proclaimed, clapping Ralph on the shoulder. “But it isn’t, so I say go for it, Mr. Slytherin.”

Ralph didn’t, but as he passed the tables laden with freshly baked snacks and waiting plates and silverware, it seemed to be a very close thing. Overhead, as always, the hundreds of floating candles made a constellation of tiny flames, bright against the darkening sky that appeared magically imprinted on the rafters and vaulted ceilings. The massive and ornate rose window at the head of the hall glowed with sunset hues, spreading its diffuse light over the gathering, chattering, laughing students.

As James threaded through them, making his way along the Gryffindor table toward the front of the hall, it occurred to him that perhaps he’d been looking at his return to school from the wrong perspective entirely. This wasn’t merely the last chapter of his Hogwarts career, after all. It was the beginning of one final hurrah, a year filled with whole weeks and months and seasons of new adventures and challenges, untold new experiences, familiar faces and lifetime memories just waiting to be made. It didn’t make the melancholy doldrums that he’d felt on the train go away, but it did balance them against the heady anticipation of the year yet to come. The current of time would carry him forward into his future whether he wished it or not. He might as well embrace the journey and enjoy the ride.

James, Ralph and the rest of the seventh-years climbed the steps to the dais in a scattered line, skirted the head table where a few teachers were just beginning to gather and take their seats, and passed through the heavy wooden door on the right side. James had been in

the antechamber only a few times before, but remembered it well. During his first year, it had been the sight of Merlin's interview with Ralph's father, wherein their true magical heritage as Dolohovs had come to light. The room looked exactly the same now as it had then: a collection of chairs and sofas scattered somewhat haphazardly around a large hearth, currently unlit and gray with cold ash. Paintings of various pastoral scenes and miscellaneous portraits surrounded the walls, packed between the pillars that supported the arcade ceiling. James recognized one of the paintings from the sketches in Ralph's antique potions book: a crowded scene representing the coronation of the first wizarding king, Kreagle. In the far corner of the scene, a dark-robed figure leaned against a wall, smoking a long pipe and ignoring the festivities. The figure looked at James as he passed, its eyes distant but watchful. It was Severus Snape, of course, in one of his many disguised portrait forms, keeping an eye on the myriad corners and recesses of the school.

"Anyone know what this is all about?" Trenton Bloch asked, throwing himself into a high-backed chair and kicking one knee up over the upholstered arm.

"S'tradition, isn't it?" replied Julian Jackson, the captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, seating herself on an ottoman before the cold hearth and smoothing her skirt primly. "Every year, McGonagall gathers the seventh-years for a little secret pep talk or something, although they're forbidden to speak of it afterward."

"I never noticed that before," Ralph commented, frowning.

"Face it, Ralph," Deirdre Finnegan offered lightly, "What you don't notice could fill the great hall from floor to ceiling."

Behind her, Kevin Murdock snorted a laugh.

Ralph's frown turned offended as he glared at Deirdre, but James smiled and nudged him with an elbow.

Millicent Vandergriff stood near Julian Jackson, leaning lightly against the arm of a sofa. She met James' eyes and gave a secretive little smile and wink. James nodded back at her, still smiling. She had changed her hair over the summer. Her long, straight locks had been

trimmed to a shoulder-length blonde bob that swung lightly whenever she turned her head. James was less surprised that she had made the change than that he had actually noticed it. Millie Vandergriff had always been merely a background face in his world: funny, a little crude, and boisterously loud from her space at the Hufflepuff table, but generally forgettable. The new haircut changed her somehow, at least in his mind. For the first time, she struck him not just as a rather shrill laugh ringing in the halls or a whispering component of some inexplicable female cabal outside the door of the girls' bathroom. Now, suddenly, she was a fairly fetching and curious girl who had, for whatever reason, taken some nominal interest in him.

As James watched, she sat down next to Julian and engaged the other girl in some animated but low-key conversation.

After a few minutes, Professor McGonagall entered, bringing with her an air of hectic gravity. The room quieted immediately and most of the students drifted into seats or clustered in knots against the outer pillars. The former headmistress circumvented the room until she stood with her back to the dark hearth, her eyes ticking over each face in a quick inventory.

“A few brief words as you enter your final year, students,” she said with no preamble, pitching her voice low, by her standards. “As you may imagine, there are certain responsibilities that go with attaining your seventh year. For better or for worse, you are now the standard bearers for everything that this school represents. Your younger classmates will look up to you as examples and role models. Some of you will rise to this responsibility, and indeed have done so already throughout your terms. Others,” she paused briefly and flicked her gaze over several faces, peering at them over her spectacles, “will struggle even to represent your own best interests, much less those of your fellows. To those who fall into the latter category, allow me to be perfectly clear: we expect better from you. *The school* expects better from you. And you should expect better of yourselves. You will soon embark on a new journey outside of these familiar walls, and there you will not find merely docked house points for flouting rules. Heed me,

for this may be the last time anyone offers you this warning.” She paused meaningfully, letting the weight of her iron gaze settle over the room like a cold blanket. Then, she softened slightly, raising her chin and drawing a breath.

“There are, however, certain privileges that accompany these responsibilities,” she said, almost with a note of reluctance. “I’ll thank you, as you may guess, not to flaunt these to your younger classmates. Let them discover them as you are about to now.” She produced a small scroll and unrolled it in her thin hands, beginning to read: “As per tradition and administrative decree, seventh-years shall not require special permission to access the restricted section of the library.”

James blinked and glanced around the room, curious to see if anyone else found this a particularly exciting privilege. Rose would be thrilled with it, he knew, but no one else in attendance showed as much as a raised eyebrow.

“Further,” McGonagall went on, still reading from the scroll, “Certain classes may be exchanged for an equal length of work in the career field of your choosing, by arrangement with the headmaster and/or related professor, not to exceed more than ninety minutes per week.”

This did inspire a response from the gathered students, who glanced around at each other and stirred in their seats, clearly excited at the prospect of trading class time for some hands-on experience, perhaps even outside the school. James glanced aside at Ralph. They had both toyed somewhat idly with the idea of going into Auror training, more for lack of any other ideas than a particular passion for the career. Did this mean they could actually trade class-time for trips to the Ministry of Magic with James’ dad? Could they actually accompany him and his partner, Titus Hardcastle, on the occasional raid or investigation? It seemed almost too tantalizing to consider, and yet perhaps it was actually possible.

“The Forbidden Forest is still forbidden,” McGonagall soldiered on, quelling the sudden hiss of whispers that had erupted around the room. “However, with the permission of the headmaster,

myself, or Professor Hagrid, you may conduct your own expeditions into the Forest for any of a list of prescribed purposes, including but not limited to: the gathering of potion ingredients, observation of certain magical creatures, herbological gardening and cultivation, and limited recreational activities.

“Additionally,” the professor said, lowering her scroll. “As many of you may be aware, this castle is endowed with many secret passageways, hidden chambers, and unmarked amenities. Some of these you will surely have discovered either by illicit exploration or by word of mouth from less scrupulous former graduates. What you may have heretofore utilized secretly and in part, you are now granted full and sanctioned access to. Tomorrow evening at ten o’clock sharp, after your classmates are confined to their common rooms and dormitories, Mr. Filch will take you on a tour of these amenities. You are neither to map these places, record any passwords, nor share in any way their locations, purposes, or benefits with any other students.”

Here she met James and Ralph’s eyes, pointedly. “Is that perfectly clear?”

James nodded, as did the rest of the gathered students. Even as he did, however, he wondered if this was a promise he could truly keep. He imagined how Rose would respond if she knew that they had kept such tantalizing secrets from her. She would probably die of outrage.

“I certainly hope you *can* abide by these rules,” McGonagall said, the doubt in her voice deliberately evident. “Because your freedom to use such amenities is dependent entirely on your ability to keep them secret. Please do not test me on this.

“Finally,” she went on, now heaving a deep sigh and removing her spectacles, allowing them to dangle on a fine chain around her neck. “I have a pronouncement that will likely shock none of you, although as with everything else said here, I would like very much for you to keep this a secret until I make my official statement.”

She looked over the crowd of seventh-years again, this time with as close to a softened expression as ever came over the professor’s stern face. “I have served both you and this school for many more years

than I ever thought possible. I have been honored to oversee not only your growth and education, but many of your parents', and even grandparents'. But now, as mixed a blessing as it will surely be, I find that I am ready to call an end to my long tenure. This shall be my last year as a member of Hogwarts' staff. My cottage and my gardens await, as do my pipe and what remains of my family. My one and only request of you, students..." Here she shook her head and, amazingly, the ghost of a wry smile curled her lips, "is that you make my final term as blissfully *uneventful* as possible."

This was met with a ripple of laughter, but as James glanced around the room he saw many faces showing what he felt: surprise and uncomfortable dismay. Professor McGonagall was currently the oldest and most prominent member of the Hogwarts staff. It was difficult even to imagine a Hogwarts without her presiding over it. Merlin may be the current headmaster, and he may occupy that post for many decades to come, but somehow he was merely the brain of the school. Professor Minerva McGonagall was its heart and soul, despite her eternally stern and stoic demeanor.

James' earlier melancholy momentarily blotted his world again, covering it like a storm cloud obscuring the summer sun. Not just because he couldn't imagine Hogwarts without Professor McGonagall, but because, after his interview with Rita Skeeter and her reminder of all the ways that the magical world seemed to be disintegrating, he had a deep fear that the professor's request for an uneventful final term was doomed even before the year had begun.

Ashley Doone raised her hand preemptorily. "What will you do, Professor?" she asked in a small voice.

McGonagall slowly shook her head, still smiling faintly. "I haven't the slightest idea, Miss Doone," she answered. "And that, my dear young friends... is the most marvelously freeing feeling in the world."

Sensing an end to the gathering, the students began to stir and murmur. McGonagall raised her voice once more. "A last order of business before you go to your house tables," she said quickly. "Most

of you will likely have learned on the train who your Head Girl and Boy shall be this year..."

"I only know that it isn't me," James muttered, smiling aside at Ralph. "And hooray for that, despite what my Mum may have wanted."

"Erm," Ralph said, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

"This year's Head Girl," McGonagall called as the students stood and drifted restlessly toward the door. "Is Miss Fiona Fourcompass of Ravenclaw House. And Head Boy shall be Mr. Ralph Deedle, of Slytherin. I trust that you both have already spoken to this year's new prefects on the train, explaining their duties and the parts you shall play in them."

Ralph nodded solemnly at the professor as James boggled at him, dumbfounded. "Did it first thing, Ma'am," he reported. "Just like the letter said."

"Why didn't you tell me?" James rasped as the gathering finally broke up and bottlenecked at the door. "It was one thing for you to get prefect back in our fifth year-- I swear it's taken me this long just to get used to *that!* But Head Boy!?"

"*That's* why I didn't tell you," Ralph rolled his eyes. "I knew you'd make a big hairy thing out of it."

"It *is* a big hairy thing!" James spluttered. "Since when are you even angling for that kind of responsibility?"

"What do you mean?" Ralph looked slightly wounded. "I've always been the responsible one. All those times you and Zane and Rose were heading off on half-witted adventures, who was the one hanging back and being all careful?"

"You weren't being 'careful'," James rolled his eyes. "You were being scared out of your wits. *Not* the same thing."

"Look," Ralph said, stopping next to the door and turning to look at James. "You were all worried that when I got prefect all of a sudden I'd be throwing a damper on your fun. Did that happen?"

"It totally did!" James whispered harshly. "You made us get back on time every Hogsmeade weekend. You made sure we couldn't

nip off with the rest of the Gremlins when they had their secret caravan holiday. You reported to my mum that I'd broken my glasses *and* nagged me ever since to wear them in class, just because she asked you to! You even told Zane to stop popping up at all hours whenever he and the experimental magical communications crew have a new technique to test out!"

"He woke me up at two in the morning floating over my bed," Ralph bristled. "I mean, fun's fun, but he nearly made me wet myself, I swear."

"Promise me this won't all go to your head, Ralph," James insisted, glaring up at the bigger boy.

"It won't and it hasn't," Ralph proclaimed, firming his jaw and pushing up to his full, prodigious height. A moment later, he slumped back to his normal posture. "Besides, at least I kept us out of any death-defying predicaments and earth-shattering plots for two whole years. And you haven't even thanked me for that."

James blew out a breath and relaxed. "I'm not sure how much credit you can take for that, exactly," he shook his head.

As they finally pushed their way back into the noise of the Great Hall and found their seats, James was interested to see the ghost of Cedrick Diggory floating near the head of the Hufflepuff table, regaling the younger students with some apparently enthralling story. Probably he was entertaining them with tales of his experiences during the legendary Tri-wizard Tournament, which was a favorite topic ever since he had become the official Hufflepuff House Ghost.

"Sometimes I miss the Fat Friar," Graham commented, grabbing a handful of rolls from a nearby platter. "Ever since he retired, The Hufflepuffs have been lording it over us with their dashing new ghost."

Scorpius shook his head in Cedrick's direction and sneered. "He certainly is rather windy for a 'Spectre of Silence'."

Rose clucked her tongue primly. "Jealousy is such an ugly emotion. I think it's wonderful that Cedrick has finally found some new friends and a purpose." She glanced back at him over her

shoulder, and then deflated slightly as she turned back. “Even if it does only remind us that Gryffindor doesn’t currently have any house ghost at all.”

“How’s that work, anyway,” Cameron Creevey asked from further down the table. “I mean, it’s tradition for every house to have one, right? Slytherin has the Bloody Baron. Ravenclaw has the Grey Lady—”

“It isn’t like we can just order a new ghost from a mail order catalog,” Graham complained. “But still. It’s a real disappointment, coming into our last year with no Gryffindor Ghost, even if old Nearly Headless Nick was a bit of a nutter sometimes.”

“Speaking of last years,” Rose perked up, lowering her voice conspiratorially and leaning eagerly toward James. “What about your big meeting with McGonagall? What sort of secrets did she let you in on? You can tell me!”

James shook his head firmly. “We’re all sworn to secrecy. Seriously. I’m forbidden from telling you a thing.”

“Come on,” Rose weedled, and then narrowed her eyes slyly. “I probably already know about it all. I just want to see how much they’ve finally let you in on.”

“You’ll have to wait until your seventh year,” James replied, raising his chin in what he hoped was a superior and lofty manner.

Rose rolled her eyes and drew her breath to retort, but at that moment Professor McGonagall called attention to the annual Sorting ceremony. James turned his attention to the head table, thankful for the distraction.

Holding the Sorting hat in her hand over a single wooden stool, Professor McGonagall called the newest students one by one to the dais. As they came, each more tentative and nervous-looking than the one before, the professor lowered the Hat onto their heads and, after either a few moments or as much as a minute, the Hat would proclaim their new house in its high, reedy voice. In turn, the houses applauded their newest members and welcomed them to their tables.

As James watched, he could scarcely believe how young the first years looked. He was on the other end of that spectrum now—to their eyes, he was surely the impossibly older and worldly-wise seventh-year. He remembered being in their shoes, thinking how much taller and more grown-up the seventh-years looked. If only he'd known then what he knew now: that seventh-years weren't really any more confident or aloof than first years. They'd just had several more years practice at *pretending* to be.

Again, James remembered Professor McGonagall's proclamation in the antechamber. This, incredibly, was her last Sorting ceremony. Who would take over for her next year? Merlin, perhaps? Or one of the other longer-term teachers, like Professor Flitwick or even Neville Longbottom? As hard as he tried, he simply could not imagine anyone else holding the Hat by its tip, reading off the names in that clipped, stern voice.

And then another rather dismaying thought occurred to James: the Sorting Hat had not sung a song before its duties this year.

It was tradition that the Hat would regale the waiting students with some possibly amusing, possibly profound lyric that it had concocted between its annual duties. And yet during James' first year it had not provided its customary tune. Nor, it seemed, did it plan to this year. Of course, as James had thought once before, after so many centuries of service, one could forgive the Hat for taking the occasional year off. But it struck him as especially troubling that, for whatever reason, his first and last years would be marked with no such musical diversion.

As the Sorting finally finished and Professor McGonagall took the Hat back with her to the head table, the entire Great Hall gave a round of hearty applause, half in welcome of their new housemates, and half in celebration that the night's official proceedings were nearly over and they could all soon go to their respective common rooms for less formal First Night merriments. The only unfinished detail was the official start-of-term announcement from Headmaster Merlin, which

James knew from experience would be brief and very much to the point.

“I hear Ralph was named Head Boy,” Rose whispered in James’ ear as the applause filled the hall. “Are you jealous?”

James glanced back at his cousin, certain that she was joking. Her raised eyebrows and knowing half-frown told him that she was not.

“Of course I’m not jealous,” James shook his head fervently. “That’s stupid. Why would anyone want to be Head Boy?!”

“Nobody becomes Head Boy or Girl because they *want* to be,” Rose whispered as the applause died down. “They do it because of the people who want it *for* them, and the expectations that it confirms. People expect Ralph to have ambitions because his dad is a big deal at the Ministry these days. But so is yours, if you hadn’t noticed.”

The room fell to silence on Rose’s last words, preventing any reply from James. All of a sudden, he didn’t know what his reply would be anyway. He frowned at Rose, but she merely looked past him, turning her attention to the headmaster as he took the ornate golden podium. Somewhat disgruntled, James turned around to watch as well.

“Greetings, students,” the big man proclaimed in his deep, rumbling voice, towering over the podium in his golden dress robes, his beard combed and gleaming with the exotic oil he wore in it for formal occasions. His heavy gaze roamed over the gathered students, marking each face. “And welcome to an all new year of lessons, camaraderie, and sport at Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry. For new students, I am Headmaster Merlinus Ambrosius. I will save us all much time and attention by stating, as always: you may look to your older classmates to inform you of how we do things here on a day-to-day basis. That is their duty and honor. Make use of the resources granted you, and if any should refuse you or lead you astray, you shall inform me personally so that I may show them the error of their ways. Our general rules are few but carefully enforced: the Forbidden Forest is forbidden for a reason. If you break this rule, the result will be at the

very least instructive, so long as it is not deadly. Curfew is ten of the clock on school nights, eleven-thirty on weekends and holidays. Our dear caretaker Mr. Filch has been authorized to carry out whatever punishments he deems fit for those who ignore this schedule, and you should be under no illusions about the creativity he is wont to employ in carrying out his duties.”

As the headmaster spoke, he nodded toward the rear of the room, where Filch stood, as usual, near the main doors, slowly stroking the head of the ancient Kneazle cat curled in his arms. Filch offered a confirming nod that was more scowl than smile. James had learned over the past two years that, amazingly, Filch and Merlin were very nearly blood-brothers in their approach to law and order. Merlin kept the old caretaker in check mainly by giving him free rein in the small responsibilities that were granted him.

“To conclude,” the headmaster went on, lowering his chin to peer intently at the gathered throng. “You will have noticed, perhaps, a few changes in our staff during the summer. Our much respected charms teacher, Professor Filius Flitwick, has finally succumbed to the demands of his muse, choosing to spend the remainder of his years in pursuit of his art and the perfect cup of oolong tea. He shall still grace us with his presence on certain special occasions. In the meantime, however, I trust you will offer a sincere greeting to your new charms teacher, Professor Donofrio Odin-Vann, himself a graduate of these esteemed halls, and a valued new member of our teaching staff.”

Tepid, confused applause washed over the room as heads craned to find the new teacher at the staff table. James was fairly shocked to discover that the new charms teacher appeared to be the young man he had glimpsed earlier that day on the train. He stood tentatively from the end of the table, smiling thinly and lifting one hand in an appreciative wave. He wore short-cropped dark hair and a tidy little pointed goatee that, on almost any other man, would have looked malevolently wicked. On him, however, it looked merely forced and contrived, rather like the young professor was trying just a

bit too hard to cultivate a dashing image. James liked him, despite his obvious youth and discomfort. Or perhaps even because of it.

“And with that, students,” Merlin proclaimed, raising both of his slab-like hands, “The official portion of the start of term festivities are concluded. You may feel free to finish your meals and repair to your dormitories, where I am quite sure--”

A sudden and wholly unexpected thumping sound echoed through the room, emanating from the tall wooden doors at the rear of the hall. Merlin paused, his brow lowering slightly at the interruption. For a moment, stony silence filled the hall. And then the doors thudded again as someone seemed to knock on them from the outside, the noise amplified by the natural acoustics of the Hall. At the sound, the doors eased open, as if pushed tentatively from the outside.

Filch watched brightly, his gaze alert and careful, stepping aside as the doors began to creak open.

Revealed behind them, eyes wide and worried behind a pair of chunky black eyeglasses, was a middle-aged man dressed in a pink polo shirt and blue jeans beneath a light jacket. His right fist was raised in a knocking gesture. Next to him was a portly woman with a mass of voluminous brown hair and a purse slung protectively over one shoulder. Two children stood behind her, a boy and a girl, one each peeking from around her prodigious hips.

“I’m sorry,” the man said, his adenoids turning the phrase into a nasally echo around the suddenly silent Hall. “The missus and I... we seem to have gotten just a wee bit lost. We saw the, um, lights of this domicile from below, and the missus, she suggested we pop up and... er... ask directions.”

Every eye in the room stared back in complete, astonished silence. Merlin himself seemed, perhaps for the first time since James had ever met him, utterly at a loss for words.

The spectacled man drew a breath and looked around, clearly trying to make sense of the scene before him, and failing miserably.

“Can any of you,” he asked querulously, clearing his throat against the echo of his own words, “point us properly in the direction

of the Lakes of Killarney? Only, we have reservations for seven o'clock, see, and..." His voice finally trailed away as the strangeness of the sight finally overwhelmed him.

Hovering near the end of the Hufflepuff table, Cedrick Diggory's ghost noticed the man's wife staring at him, her eyes so wide that the whites were visible all the way around. Her fingers trembled at the base of her throat. Her lips quivered in a tiny frown of speechless shock.

"Boo?" Cedrick said, raising a hand and wagging his fingers at her.

Ponderously, the woman keeled over backwards in a dead, heavy faint.

"It appears, Mr. Caretaker," Merlin finally said in a wholly different voice than before, eyeing Mr. Filch where he still stood next to the rear doors. "That we have rather unexpected Muggle guests. Please, let us make sure that they feel perfectly... *at home*."



TOMORROW:

QUIDDITCH HOPES!

A SECRET FIRST-NIGHT MEETING!

ALBUS SAYS SOMETHING CAGY! (WHAT ELSE IS NEW?)